

The Emotional Curriculum: A Review of Drama-Based Interventions for Emotional Intelligence in Indian Schools

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Abstract

Over the past decade, educational policies in India have increasingly pressed upon the need for holistic development that includes not only cognitive and academic development but also emotional and social competencies. Emotional Intelligence (EI) which includes emotional awareness, behaviour regulation, empathy, and interpersonal skills, has gained prominence as a key determinant of student well-being and success at school. In parallel, drama and theatre-based pedagogies have been widely adopted across Indian schools, both in urban and rural contexts, as innovative tools for fostering EI. This paper reviews research literature on drama-based interventions conducted in India between 2015 and 2025 and draws on 42 peer-reviewed studies, action research projects, and field-based evaluations to assess if drama does indeed contribute to EI. It uses socio-cultural and constructivist perspectives as its theoretical framework, framing drama as experiential learning. The findings of this review study advocate for the integration of drama as a fundamental pedagogical approach in schools across India to enhance the Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) of the learners.

Keywords: Emotional intelligence, drama-in-education, Indian schools, empathy, theatre pedagogy

Introduction

Current educational discourses and practices increasingly focus on the emotional intelligence of students, particularly in settings that emphasise

student well-being, inclusivity, and holistic development. In a country like India, where the education system is multifaceted, stakeholders in education have expressed and acknowledged the significance of emotions in the learning process (Khan et al., 2024). The National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 strongly advocates a transformative shift towards competency-based education, together with the development of socio-emotional skills. Socio-Emotional skills or Emotional Intelligence (EI), can be defined as the ability of an individual to recognise, comprehend, and regulate emotions in oneself (Mayer & Salovey, 1997). It is linked to enhanced academic performance, better mental health, leadership skills, and effective peer interactions (Goleman, 1995; CASEL, 2020). Considering the significance of EI in the holistic development of children, drama-based teaching methods have gained popularity as a potential means to boost social-emotional skills in Indian classrooms. In contrast to hackneyed teacher-centric teaching approaches, drama provides experiential, reflective, participatory and student-centric learning settings. Through activities like role play, improvisation, and narrative exploration, students participate in embodied emotional inquiry. Theatre practices enable children to express emotions, appreciate diverse viewpoints, and navigate emotional challenges in a safe and structured environment. The drama process naturally engages both affective and cognitive domains, making it particularly effective for Social and Emotional Learning (SEL).

The immense popularity of the SEL framework in global lesson designing has also inspired researchers, teachers, and policy makers in India to consider ways through which EI can be cultivated in students. The goal is to find a sustainable method that is culturally relevant and developmentally appropriate. In such a scenario, drama with roots in storytelling, community rituals, and indigenous folk tales, acts as a pedagogical bridge between contemporary SEL goals and India's rich heritage of expressive arts. With the educational system transitioning to a competency-based model under NEP 2020, emotional competencies are being acknowledged not just as soft skills but as indispensable twenty-first century literacies. Drama-based interventions play a dual role as they not only foster individual emotional growth but also establish collaborative spaces for reflection, empathy, and democratic discourse. It is crucial, therefore, to conduct a systematic review of drama-based intervention studies to establish evidence-based research practices

and develop approaches that can be adapted and implemented across diverse classrooms in India.

From 2015 to 2025, numerous Indian schools, NGOs, and teacher education institutions piloted fully integrated drama-based programmes designed to enhance EI. These included government schools, prestigious private institutions, and some English-medium schools, with backing from organisations such as Theatre Professionals, Drama for School Change, and the National School of Drama (NSD), among others. Despite frequent anecdotal and practitioner reports that emphasise success stories, there is still a need for a systematic review of the empirical evidence regarding these initiatives. This paper aims to fill that gap by critically synthesising peer-reviewed studies, and practitioner-led action research conducted throughout India over the last decade. The aim is to explore how drama-based practices in schools across India have contributed to developing emotional intelligence among students aged 6 to 18.

This review is centred around the key research question: How do drama-based interventions affect the emotional intelligence of Indian students in the age group 6 to 18?

Research Questions

- (a) What models and methodologies of drama have been used?
- (b) Which dimensions of emotional intelligence have been most impacted?

Methodology

This systematic review paper employs a structured methodology based on the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. The literature search focused on locating empirical studies, programme evaluations, and action research projects conducted between January 2015 and April 2025, with an emphasis on drama based interventions and emotional intelligence within the context of the Indian school system. The databases explored include ERIC, JSTOR, Google Scholar, Shodhganga, and the Scispace. Keeping in mind the objectives of the study, an inclusion criteria was set up as follows:

- i. studies conducted within the geographical territory of India;
- ii. focus on learners aged between 6–18 years;

- iii. use of drama as a core pedagogical tool;
- iv. documented impact on one or more dimensions of emotional intelligence; and
- v. peer-reviewed publications, dissertations, or credible NGO reports.

At the outset, a total of 140 articles were reviewed, out of which 42 papers were selected for an in-depth review based on their relevance to the objectives of the study and a qualitative approach was used to present the core findings of the study. Thematic coding analysis helped to organise the findings into emerging categories that correlate with the dimensions of emotional intelligence.

Theoretical Framework

This review integrates two intersecting theoretical frameworks: socio-cultural learning and constructivist pedagogy. Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory posits that social interaction, linguistic and cultural tools play a prominent role in shaping cognitive and emotional development among students. Drama, characterised by dialogue, collaboration, and shared symbolic systems, fits well within this framework. Socially mediated role-playing coupled with reflective discussions help to build and nurture emotional knowledge. Constructivist learning theories, particularly those influenced by Bruner (1996) and Dewey (1974), emphasise the importance of experiential learning, narrative exploration, and active engagement in the holistic development of students. Drama encourages personal meaning-making by allowing students to link emotions with real-life experiences.

This paper defines EI using Mayer and Salovey's (1997) four-branch model (facilitating thought, perceiving, understanding, and managing emotions) and the CASEL framework (self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making). Collectively, these frameworks posit that teaching EI or socio-emotional skills through drama-based pedagogy is highly feasible as drama involves the use of both, mind and body, dialogues, and the reflective process, all rooted in real-world social contexts and cultural narratives.

Review of Literature (2015–25)

With a focus on drama-based interventions in schools across India, 42 studies conducted between 2015 and 2025 were critically analysed. The

findings and research gaps from these studies are presented here, region wise.

The Theatre Professionals' Education programme in Mumbai, Maharashtra, used theatre-based activities to teach empathy and reflective thinking to elementary school students (Theatre Professionals, 2021; Iyer, 2017). Assessment reports record improved emotional vocabulary and stronger peer relationships (Iyer, 2017; Anderson & Dunn, 2015). In a similar study conducted by Sharma and Rathi, 2020, the 'Drama for School Change' project converted classrooms into stages where students were given lessons in civic sense through the integration of forum theatre. This highly interactive and participatory theatre works to achieve social goals by staging short plays based on class, gender, and other prominent social concerns. It reflects the lived experiences of the participating community and finds creative solutions to unresolved social issues. Students rehearsed and acted real-life conflicts from their own school and neighbourhood and learnt to articulate emotions and manage peer dynamics.

In Tamil Nadu, a programme using shadow puppetry and local folktales engaged primary school learners in emotional storytelling. The study reports that teachers were surprised to observe that students who had earlier struggled to express themselves showed enhanced self-awareness and empathy (Ramanathan, 2018; Theatre Professionals, 2021). In the National Capital Region, an inclusive education programme used drama to address issues of bullying and gender stereotyping. Data collected through case studies reports greater emotional safety and inclusivity in classrooms, especially for students from marginalised communities.

In the state of Rajasthan students role-played community issues such as migration and domestic conflict, which built a sense of empathy and social awareness resulting in improved socio-emotional skills (Theatre Professionals, 2021; Sharma & Rathi, 2020). Reflective interviews indicated increased confidence, perspective-taking, and self-regulation among participants. A project in Assam integrated a traditional Bihu performance with reflective emotion diaries. This improved the emotional articulation and social connectedness among students (Gupta & Sen, 2021).

Collectively, these studies reflect the diversity of approaches in drama-based pedagogy and the consistent emphasis on using drama as a

reflective, participatory, and emotionally grounded practice in Indian education.

Findings

The following section presents the main findings of the study synthesised after a systematic review of the 42 research papers. The themes generated are categorised by major emotional intelligence competencies.

i. Enhanced Emotional Vocabulary and Awareness

Drama-based interventions often involved students in identifying, expressing, and examining a variety of emotional experiences (Iyer, 2017; Ramanathan, 2018). Exercises like character monologues, emotion wheels, and reflective journaling enabled students to develop a broad emotional vocabulary (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Akyil & Deniz, 2022). Programmes in Mumbai and Chennai showed that consistent engagement in these activities enhanced students' ability to articulate their emotions in both personal and academic contexts (Iyer, 2017; Ramanathan, 2018).

ii. Improved Empathy and Perspective-Taking

Empathy is one of the core dimensions of emotional intelligence. In this context, most of the studies paint a very sunny picture, suggesting that students learn to empathise and shape their perspectives logically through critical thinking. This is the result of engaging in role-play and character embodiment exercises, which prove to be an effective way for students to learn to empathise with others (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Gupta & Sen, 2021). Forum theatre allowed student participants from Delhi to gain better insights into the social and emotional make-up of their classmates from different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (Happy School Project, 2022). Similarly, in a study conducted in Assam by Gupta and Sen (2021), found that a drama-based curriculum improved students' abilities to empathise, and understand the emotions and motivations of characters, leading to increased compassion in their interactions with their peers.

iii. Strengthened Self-Regulation and Anger Management

Many drama-based interventions incorporated strategies for recognising emotional triggers and choosing alternative behavioural responses (Sharma & Rathi, 2020; Pillai & Menon, 2022). In Jaipur and Bengaluru, intervention programmes incorporating breathing exercises, structured

improvisation, and conflict-resolution scenarios allowed students to rehearse real-life emotional challenges (Sharma & Rathi, 2020; Theatre for Inclusion, 2019). Teachers observed a slight reduction in impulsive behaviour and better classroom discipline following these activities (Sharma & Rathi, 2020; Theatre Professionals, 2021).

iv. Development of Social and Communication Skills

Drama activities require collaboration, active and critical listening, the ability to take turns, and effective verbal communication (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Theatre Professionals, 2021). In group performances and improvisational acts, students honed their skills in delivering dialogue, modulating their voice, and becoming aware of body language (Iyer, 2017; Pillai & Menon, 2022). Similarly, Pillai and Menon, 2022, report that students showed progress in starting conversations, resolving conflicts among peers, and participating respectfully in group activities.

v. Increased Self-Awareness and Confidence

Ramanathan (2018), and Akyil and Deniz (2022) assert that drama has the potential to foster self-introspection, especially through the narration of personal stories, mask activities, and individual performances. The act of personal storytelling helps students to introspect on their own actions, which in turn helps in creating self-awareness. The students participating in such activities exhibit enhanced self-esteem, public speaking readiness, and increased confidence in maintaining boundaries.

vi. Gender and Inclusion Sensitivity

Various initiatives tackled gender norms and cultural prejudices (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019; Gupta & Sen, 2021). In Karnataka and Tamil Nadu, boys were asked to play roles that questioned toxic masculinity, while girls were asked to take up roles that demonstrated leadership and assertiveness (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019). Additionally, drama was used to address social issues like caste and gender-based exclusion, with activities like role reversals and collaborative storytelling, exercises which helped to break societal stereotypes and promote empathy (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019).

vii. Sustained Impact with Teacher Facilitation

Programmes in which teachers played a role as co-creators and facilitators of drama activities achieved more lasting results (Theatre Professionals, 2021; Happy School Project, 2022). In Madhya Pradesh, interventions led

by teachers that included reflection circles maintained emotional benefits throughout the academic year (Theatre Professionals, 2021). In contrast, when external facilitators were involved without teacher participation, the improvements were often short-lived (Theatre Professionals, 2021).

viii. Contextual Adaptability

Drama-based interventions are highly versatile, with their impact cutting across linguistic, cultural, and resource-poor environments (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Theatre Professionals, 2021). They have benefited students in metros like Mumbai and Delhi, and been impactful even in the remote tribal regions of Jharkhand. Using traditional folktales as base, emotional role-playing activities have helped tribal students to build better socio-emotional skills (Theatre Professionals, 2021). In certain urban classrooms, digital storytelling and audio-visual performances have helped bridge linguistic gaps (Happy School Project, 2022). This flexibility ensures that interventions stay connected to students' real-life experiences while fostering essential emotional skills (Vygotsky, 1978; CASEL, 2020).

These findings shed light on the impact and the complex role that drama plays in enhancing emotional intelligence of students in Indian classrooms. When applied effectively and contextually, drama can act as a transformative tool for socio-emotional learning (CASEL, 2020; Ministry of Education, 2020).

Educational Implications

This review offers significant insights for the Indian education system, especially concerning curriculum development, teaching methods, teacher education, and educational policies (Ministry of Education, 2020; Khan et al., 2024). A majority of the studies reflected the positive impact on the socio-emotional development of students across different context in India. The reflections from low-resourced classrooms (Jharkhand) as well as well-equipped ones (Mumbai and Delhi) are proof that drama-based emotional curriculum can be impactful in any scenario provided it is implemented properly. This also proves that drama-based interventions are not just supplementary or extracurricular activities but are a prerequisite for the holistic development of students (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Theatre Professionals, 2021).

One of the many significant implications of this study is the strong need

to formally incorporate drama-based pedagogy into school curricula (Ministry of Education, 2020). With the NEP 2020 and NCF-FS 2022 highlighting socio-emotional learning as a significant component of holistic development, there is an urgent need to integrate well-structured drama modules into existing subjects like language, arts, moral science, and life skills education (Ministry of Education, 2020). These courses need to be conducted as regular sessions, taking place weekly, and should be implemented stage-wise across different grade levels (Theatre Professionals, 2021). Drama provides genuine opportunities to students to engage with real-world issues, conflicts, and emotional reactions in a way that textbooks cannot replicate (Anderson & Dunn, 2015).

Another significant educational implication thrown up by this systematic review is regarding teacher's professional development, which needs urgent attention (Happy School Project, 2022). The long-term success and impact of drama interventions depends on teachers' potential and confidence to create, implement, and assess drama-based educational activities (Theatre Professionals, 2021). B Ed and D El Ed courses must include modules on innovative teaching methods, offering hands-on experience with theatre-in-education techniques (Anderson & Dunn, 2015). Teacher professional development programmes should also focus on experiential workshops where teachers can learn to implement role-play, forum theatre, and emotion-mapping as teaching tools (Sharma & Rathi, 2020; Pillai & Menon, 2022). Providing teachers with reflective strategies is essential for ensuring the emotional safety of drama environments (Anderson & Dunn, 2015).

It is essential that school leaders and administrators be made aware of the emotional and educational benefits of drama (Happy School Project, 2022; Theatre Professionals, 2021). Often, scheduling limitations confine these activities to specific days or times (Theatre Professionals, 2021). School principals must be encouraged to establish a supportive framework focused on the smooth integration of drama into the curriculum. There must be dedicated time slots for drama, inter-class sharing opportunities, and school journals which can help to highlight such work. Partnering with specialised theatre teachers, NGOs, and local cultural organisations can enhance the programme's design and ensure its quality and continuity (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019). Furthermore, the Central Education Ministry and their state counterparts should accept drama as a means not only of arts education but also as a tool to foster

inclusive and equitable learning (Ministry of Education, 2020). Schools must be given extra funds and grants to invest in resources, facilitators, and documentation for better implementation of drama pedagogy. National organisations like NCERT and SCERTs should lead the way in developing open-source drama modules, teacher guides, and assessment rubrics that align with emotional competencies (Ministry of Education, 2020; CASEL, 2020).

To conclude, the use of drama's embodied and empathetic teaching techniques can greatly improve inclusive education (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019). Studies have highlighted that drama can break stereotypes, foster mutual understanding among students, and amplify the voices of those who are frequently marginalised (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019; Gupta & Sen, 2021). Customised interventions for girls, students with disabilities, and communities oppressed by caste discrimination can transform classroom dynamics and promote social justice education (Theatre for Inclusion, 2019). In culturally diverse classrooms, drama offers a way to express different identities and reclaim cultural narratives (Anderson & Dunn, 2015; Theatre Professionals, 2021).

Limitations and Challenges

Although the evidence highlighted in this systematic review appears largely encouraging, it is important to recognise the limitations. A considerable number of the studies reviewed, relied on qualitative methods, including interviews, observations, and case studies, with minimal use of standardised EI assessment tools. This raises concerns about the ability to generalise and replicate the findings across various educational contexts. Then, some studies did not include baseline data or control groups, complicating the task of attributing changes in student outcomes solely to drama interventions.

Another notable limitation was that a number of projects were executed as temporary or pilot programmes, led by external NGOs or independent researchers instead of being integrated into the educational systems. This dependence on outside facilitation restricts both scalability and sustainability. Moreover, there is a shortage of follow-up data to determine if improvements in emotional intelligence endured over time or not. Longitudinal studies in this area are uncommon.

It is also noteworthy that teachers often mentioned contextual challenges

like overcrowded classrooms, exam-focused curricula, and inflexible school schedules as obstacles to incorporating drama. Some of them even expressed unease or a lack of confidence in leading drama activities, highlighting a deficiency in professional training.

Although drama is naturally inclusive, only a few studies have specifically examined intersectional aspects like caste, disability, or language diversity. This gap signifies a lost chance to investigate drama's ability to address marginalisation in more intricate ways. Lastly, publication bias might distort the findings of this review, as projects that are unsuccessful or yield inconclusive results are less likely to be recorded or published. Most of the available reports were in English, which could potentially overlook valuable insights from research and practices in local languages.

Conclusion

This systematic review has explored how drama-based interventions have helped to develop the emotional intelligence of students in Indian classrooms between 2015 and 2025. The results imply that drama could be an efficient instructional tool to enhance emotional vocabulary, empathy, self-control, self-awareness, and interpersonal skills. These abilities are essential for academic success and the mental well-being of students, and their role as responsible citizens in a democratic society.

Analysing drama through the lens of socio-cultural and constructivist educational models, this paper demonstrates how participatory and embodied learning can foster emotionally responsive classrooms. Although there are challenges related to assessment, scalability, and teacher preparedness, yet incorporating drama into the emotional curriculum has the potential to be transformative if arts-based methods like drama receive the necessary institutional, pedagogical, and policy support. As this review illustrates, drama can, encourage students not only to learn but also to feel, reflect, and grow together.

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