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The Evaluation Gap in Arts-Based Social-Emotional Learning

Evidence from a Global Systematic Review of 63 Studies

Payal Jain Co-founder, Populi LLP

Tanushree Patel Chief Impact Officer, Saturday Art Class

www.populi.co.in | www.saturdayartclass.com



A South-Asia based Monitoring, Evaluation & Learning (MEL) firm working with civil society organisations, funders, and social enterprises across South Asia. Populi builds robust evidence systems, designs and conducts evaluations, and generates actionable insights that strengthen programme effectiveness and long-term impact.



Adding He(art) to Education

Saturday Art Class is a non-profit educational organization focused on providing visual arts and social-emotional learning (SEL) to students from low-income communities in India. We work with children in their formative years to give them a safe space to express and build essential skills to thrive.



Where are you joining from and what do you do?

👉 Tell us your city and your role in a line!



Have you ever seen arts-based learning change something in you or other children or young person that was hard to put into words?

👉 A moment, a shift, a spark : drop it in the chat



WHAT IS ARTS-BASED SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING?

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL)

Developing the skills and values needed to manage emotions, build relationships, make responsible decisions, and achieve positive outcomes in school and life

Arts-Based Intervention

A structured activity using art, music, dance, theatre, writing, or movement to drive developmental, educational, therapeutic, or social outcomes. In the EGM, SEL is treated as an outcome, not the intervention.



2/11/23

Topic Design a comic story based on a social issue



WHAT WE'LL COVER TODAY

01

The Evidence Gap Map

What is it and why does it matter for arts-based SEL?

02

What We Found

Key findings across 63 global studies: geography, outcomes, and study design

03

Three Critical Challenges

Geographic bias · Lack of longitudinal research · Missing observational tools

04

Why Current Methods Fall Short

Especially in low-resource, Global South contexts

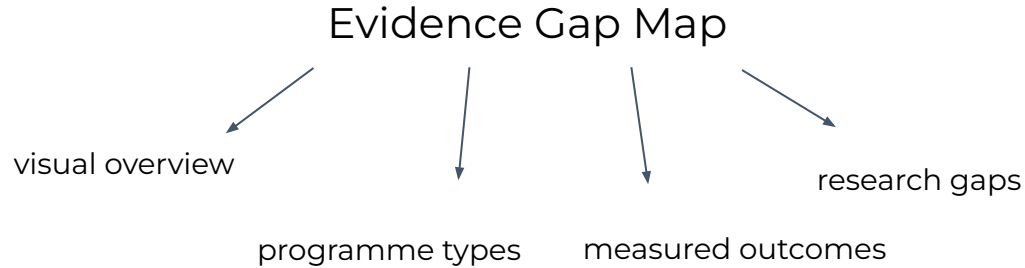
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Pathways Forward

Building stronger, context-responsive evaluation for arts-based SEL



WHAT IS AN EVIDENCE GAP MAP?



Catalogs evidence



Evaluates quality



Reveals geography



Illuminates gaps

HOW WE BUILT THE EGM: THE PICOS METHOD

63 studies / 6 continents / Systematic literature review



Population

Any country, all grades & ages, all residence types (rural/ urban/ peri-urban)



Intervention

Arts-based programs- visual arts, music, dance, theatre, movement



Comparison

Studies with or without control/comparison groups



Outcomes

SEL outcomes identified and mapped



Study Design

All types: RCTs, quasi-experimental, case studies, grey literature



The Evidence Gap Map

Arts-Based Social-Emotional Learning

Evidence Gap Map

Saturday Art Class × Populi LLP | Global systematic review (2000–2024)

63

Studies

17

Countries

3

Longitudinal

2

RCTs

STUDY DESIGN →

RCT

Quasi-Experimental

Longitudinal

Systematic Review

Case Study / Observational

Theoretical / Policy

No studies

SEL OUTCOMES

Self-Awareness

Self-Management

Social Awareness

Relationship Skills

Responsible Decision-Making

Creativity & Imagination

Joy & Wellbeing

VISUAL ARTS

Visual Arts

10

6

15

6

2

8

4

6

3

11

3

8

6

10

6

2

8

4

10

8

2

5

5

3

5

7

5

INTEGRATED

Multi-Arts /
Integrated

8

8

4

4

5

5

5

5

6

6

4

4

4

4

3

3

DRAMA

Theatre / Drama

8

8

5

5

5

5

6

6

4

4

4

4

3

3

MUSIC

Music

8

8

5

5

5

5

6

6

4

4

4

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3

3

DANCE

Dance / Movement

8

8

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5

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POLICY

Policy / Theoretical

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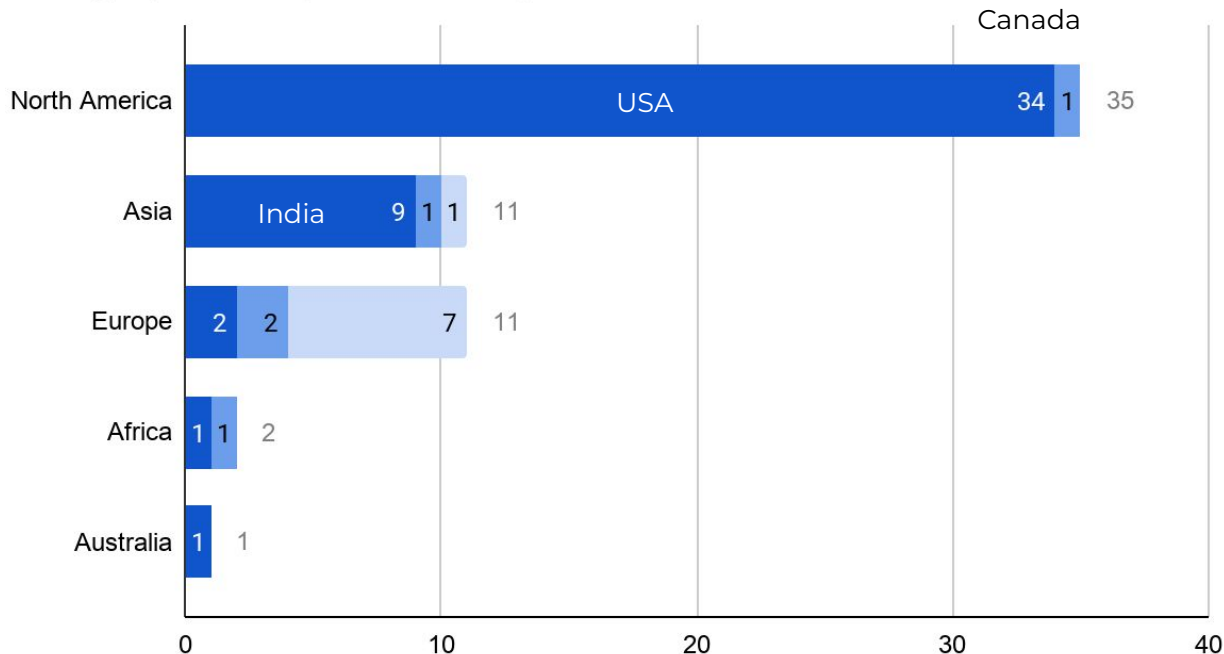
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3

FINDING 1: WHERE IS THE EVIDENCE?

Geographical Spread of Papers



54% of all evidence comes from the USA alone

Total number of studies in North America: 35

America = 34

Canada = 1

14% from India, highest in Asia

Total number of studies in Asia: 11

India = 9

Malaysia = 1

Philippines = 1

3% from Africa, severely underrepresented

Total number of studies in Africa: 2

Kenya = 1

Nigeria = 1

0 studies from Latin America or Middle East



Global south is critically underrepresented in arts-based SEL research.

FINDING 2: WHAT OUTCOMES ARE STUDIED?

41 outcomes identified across the 63 studies. Most-studied vs least-studied:

✓ Frequently Studied

Self-Awareness *21 studies*

Emotional Regulation *16 studies*

Empathy *14 studies*

Creativity *18 studies*

Critical Thinking *High esp. STEAM*

Confidence *Studied by arts programs*

⚠ Evidence Gaps

Compassion *Not found in literature*

Imagination *Only 5 studies*

Cultural Awareness *Severely understudied*

Joy *Not viewed as SEL skill*

Teacher SEL Skills *Evidence only qualitative*

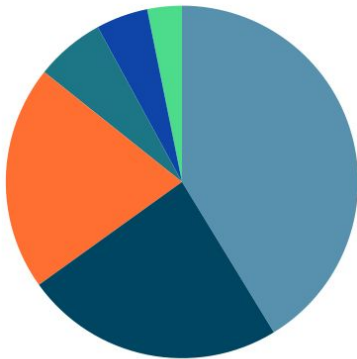
SArC's core outcomes — Joy, Imagination, Compassion — are missing from global research.

FINDING 3: HOW IS EVIDENCE PRODUCED?

Only 28.5% of studies (18 of 63) used a control group.

Evidence split by type of study

● Case Studies/ Observational ● Quasi Experimental ● Theoretical
● Longitudinal ● RCT ● Systematic Review



Most long-term programs rely on qualitative or quasi-experimental methods; RCTs are rare



Only 4 longitudinal studies found: a major gap in tracking SEL growth over time



Classroom observation tools are rarely used
real-time engagement goes unmeasured



Most long-term programs do not use RCTs
due to budget, time, and feasibility
constraints

2 RCTs and 3 longitudinal studies actually measured SEL outcomes

THREE CRITICAL CHALLENGES

Why the evaluation gap persists in arts-based SEL

01

Geographic Bias

Research overwhelmingly skewed to the Global North

02

Lack of Longitudinal Research

Only 4 studies track SEL development over time

03

Missing Observational Tools

Real classroom impact remains uncaptured



CHALLENGE 1: GEOGRAPHIC BIAS

The evidence base does not reflect the contexts where most arts-based SEL programs operate.

What the data shows

54% of all studies come from the USA.

India ranks 2nd with just 9 studies.

Africa has only 2 studies both from just 2 countries.

Latin America: zero studies found.

Why this is a problem

Evaluation frameworks built on Western, high-resource contexts don't translate.

Local cultural nuance
community, identity, artistic traditions are absent.

Funders make decisions based on evidence that doesn't apply to Global South realities.

What's needed

Context-responsive evaluation tools designed for and tested in South Asian and African settings.

Local researchers must lead evidence production, not just participate in it.

Funders must invest in geographically diverse research.



CHALLENGE 2: ABSENCE OF LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH

4

longitudinal studies
out of 63 reviewed

SEL is a developmental journey but we're only measuring snapshots.

- Cross-sectional designs dominate: we see where students are, not how they grew.
- Without longitudinal data, it's impossible to attribute SEL development to arts programs with confidence.
- Non-participating students are rarely tracked over time, making comparisons unreliable.
- Most programs end without a follow-up assessment; impact dissipates without being documented.

Implication: Without longitudinal tracking, the 'impact' of arts-based SEL remains an assumption, not a finding.

CHALLENGE 3: We measure the wrong constructs

We know what programs aim to achieve but the tools we use don't work towards that.

The Gap

Self-report surveys dominate but they can't capture in-session experience, creative risk, or relational dynamics

Instruments are borrowed from Western psychology and rarely validated for the contexts where arts-based SEL actually runs

Facilitators who are the intervention, are almost never measured

Why It Matters

We are measuring the easier things

Facilitator quality is likely the largest source of variation in outcomes

What's Needed

Observation protocols designed specifically for arts learning contexts

Tools that carry observation long-term

Dipstick studies on educator SEL competencies before and after training

WHY CURRENT METHODS FAIL IN LOW-RESOURCE CONTEXTS

The methods that dominate arts-based SEL evaluation were designed for well-resourced, Western schools and they show.



RCTs are resource-intensive

Randomized controlled trials requires significant funding, dedicated personnel & time, dilemma of controlled group intervention



Budget & time

Long-term studies require funding that most arts organisations lack.



Instrument mismatch

Western-developed tools often overlook Indian contexts and community-based understandings of SEL.



Invisible competencies

Joy, imagination, and compassion are often missed by conventional quantitative measures.



No teacher baseline

Educators' SEL baselines are rarely measured, limiting insights into facilitator impact.

PATHWAYS TO STRONGER EVALUATION

Building context-responsive evaluation that captures real impact in arts-based SEL:

- 1 Invest in construct clarity**
- 2 Prioritise longitudinal design over cross sectional cuts**
- 3 Document the intervention before evaluating it**
- 4 Build evaluation partnerships**



LET'S DISCUSS

Questions to open the conversation:

Q1 In your context, what evaluation methods have actually captured arts-based SEL outcomes well?

Q2 What do Joy, Imagination, and Compassion look like in a classroom? How might we measure them?

Q3 How do we make the case to funders that longitudinal, observation-based evaluation is worth the investment?

KEY TAKEAWAYS

What this EGM tells us and what it asks of us

- 01** The evidence base for arts-based SEL is growing, but it is geographically skewed; the Global North dominates, and South Asia is underrepresented.
- 02** Core arts outcomes, Joy, Imagination, Compassion, are invisible in global research. The sector is measuring the wrong things.
- 03** Without longitudinal designs, we cannot prove that arts programs build SEL only that students who participate test differently.
- 04** Current evaluation tools were not built for low-resource, community-based, culturally distinct contexts. New tools are urgently needed.
- 05** The field needs local researchers, context-responsive methods, and funders willing to invest in evaluation as a core program component.