

Proposer Name: Siegel, Benjamin

Project Title: "Acting Out": Theater-Based Social-Emotional Learning in Early Childhood Education

Email: siegel3@stolaf.edu

Majors: Education, English

Graduation Year: 2026

If you plan to complete this project with a fellow student collaborator, list their name, major and graduation year below.

What are your specific goals? This project explores the efficacy and feasibility of theater-based social-emotional learning (SEL) for children ages 3-5. The project's goals are twofold:

1. To devise interactive theater for preschool audiences that (a) teaches emotion identification and regulation, in keeping with recent SEL research and (b) incorporates research-based best practices for theater for young audiences (TYA)
2. To assess the effectiveness of these theatrical performances as an SEL intervention, with attention to the efficacy of specific program elements and for particular student demographics

What contributions does your project make to your area of study? Research affirms a positive relationship between engagement with theater and increased social-emotional skills, such as perspective taking (Mages 2018; Lewandowska & Węziak-Białowska 2021). Social-emotional learning is an ever-growing field, and early childhood centers, primary schools, and secondary schools worldwide are embracing SEL practices as critically important for students' long-term success. Yet, little research has brought theater and classroom-based SEL into conversation (Schnyder, Wicer, & Huber 2021). Few pieces of theater incorporate research-backed social-emotional education practices, and an even smaller subset of pieces target young audiences in their early childhood/early elementary years. There is also very little data-based evidence on the efficacy (or lack thereof) of such efforts. My project addresses these gaps, asking whether and how theater-based social-emotional education is effective and feasible in the early childhood classroom. The final paper will detail which elements of my plays were/were not effective and which practices were/were not feasible in the classroom setting. By disaggregating results according to student demographics, I will also be able to assess efficacy for particular student populations. My report will offer other artists and educators a sense of direction, as my findings can provide a road map for future classroom-based theater interventions. The scripts I develop will also themselves be shared with other artist-educators and could be used as a framework for future theatre-making.

What methods will you use in creating/completing your project?

Methods

This action research project will examine research-backed theater for young audiences as a tool for early childhood/elementary social-emotional education. Action researchers seek to simultaneously study an issue and enact transformative change, continually planning, acting, and fact-finding (Lewin 1946; Dusty 2024). In my project, a team of theater artists will bring plays to the classroom, targeting growth in emotion identification and regulation. The project will be conducted at Little Tigers, a pair of early childhood education centers in central Iowa (Little Tigers Clubhouse in Gilbert, Iowa and Little Tigers Learning Center in Adel, Iowa). I will work with three classes (age 3, age 4, and preschool) at both locations.

First, I will meet with the staff at both Little Tigers locations for an early assessment of their needs; the meetings will include myself, the location's director, and at least one teacher from each class to which I am presenting. I will hold one meeting at each location with the goal of identifying the particular social-emotional strengths and challenges of their student populations and opportunities for seamless integration into their existing curriculum and routines. The meetings will be approximately 45 minutes long and recorded, with consent, for future reference. The meetings will be conducted via video call in early April.

Then, I will provide parents/guardians with information on the project and obtain consent from parents/guardians at Little Tigers, using a form available as a hard copy or digitally. Translations and/or interpreter services will be provided as needed. The site has agreed to facilitate the distribution and collection of these forms during student drop-off and pick-up in April. Information about the project's purpose and methods will be available on the consent form. I will also provide a more thorough explanation in a recorded presentation, which each location's director will send to parents/guardians via email.

I will develop six pieces of theater for young audiences, each of which will address the particular social-emotional needs of students in the program. In an early conversation with the Gilbert location's director, I learned that Little Tigers is currently employing the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children and Conscious Discipline in their classrooms, and students in the target age range (ages 3-5) are focused on identifying emotions, self-regulation, and co-regulation. While the students are making progress with the Pyramid Model and Conscious Discipline's techniques and models, the director expressed a desire for additional support. My pieces will intentionally apply themes and vocabulary from the center's existing interventions to support students' emotion identification and regulation.

The plays will implement processive thematic content, focusing on the same central character's experience with different emotional states. Plays will feature recurring characters, songs, etc.,

allowing them to become a memorable part of the students' routines and understandings (Wood 1997). While the exact content of the plays will be determined in response to the assessment of needs, they will align with the following basic outline. The first play will help students identify the physical experiences that accompany basic emotional categories (happy, sad, angry). This interactive exercise in emotion identification will also introduce memorable characters, a setting, and a song that will continue to appear in future plays. The second week will build on the skills addressed in the first, offering more practice with happiness, sadness, and anger and introducing more complex emotions (excited, scared). This model will continue; each play will use audience interaction to provide practice opportunities with previously covered concepts and introduce a new set of ideas. The third week will introduce self-regulation strategies, the fourth week will introduce co-regulation strategies, and the fifth week will introduce helping others when they experience big feelings. The sixth week will not introduce new concepts, but the piece will show the resolution of the plays' conflict and help students synthesize all of the ideas introduced.

As I write and prepare the pieces, I will draw on the work of scholars and theatremakers David Wood (1997), Julie Woods-Robinson (2018), Debra McLauchlan (2016), and Ernie Nolan (2023) to ensure that the pieces adequately serve children's unique ways of imagining, devoting attention, and remembering. Some specific techniques include improvised pre-performance contact with characters, multisensory experiences (items to hold, aromas in the space, etc.), gentle music, continual surprises, invited and spontaneous audience responses, a simple plot, repetition (both within shows and between shows), and characters that are child-like but not childish. Each performance will end with an interactive segment that allows students to practice the show's "target skill". Students will be given sentence stems to use when they are experiencing "big feelings" and will have an opportunity to practice their use.

The pieces will be rehearsed and performed by myself and two co-facilitating artists. I will complete the hiring process prior to the official start of the project; I was heavily involved in the central Iowa theater community prior to my time at St. Olaf, and I have connections with local theater companies through which I can promote and recruit for this opportunity.

We will perform the plays twice at each site -- once for the 3-4 year old classes and once for the preschool class. Each session will be 30 minutes in length and be held in the students' classroom. The session will begin with 5 minutes of improvised pre-performance contact with a character. At least one actor, in character, will guide the students in an activity related to the story, establishing a unique audience-character relationship. Then, we will gently transition into the play; without announcing a formal transition, the actor will guide the students to sit and use song to draw them into the beginning of the play's action. The body of the session will feature 15-20 minutes of scripted dialogue/action and audience interaction. The final 5-10 minutes of the session will be devoted to a guided roleplay activity in which students explicitly practice the play's "target skill" alongside the characters. The set will be minimal, and actors will bring set

pieces in and out of the room with them; the intervention will not require additional time for set-up and tear-down.

The feedback and assessment process will include three elements: teacher interviews, student interactions, and a staff survey. First, I will conduct weekly individual interviews with at least one teacher from each class. Each interview will last roughly 10 minutes and, with consent, will be recorded. Teachers will be asked to reflect on changes in students' behaviors (both class-wide patterns and student-specific patterns) and which elements of the plays seem/do not seem to be effective and enjoyable. I will ask teachers to reflect on variance in efficacy, both between individual students and between demographic groups (class, cultures, language abilities, and (dis)ability categories). While much of students' demographic information will be unavailable to me, I will guide teachers to examine emergent themes based on their preexisting knowledge of students' backgrounds and experiences. I will also spend approximately five hours per week as a volunteer teacher at each location. During my embedded time in the classrooms, I will take written notes on relevant observations surrounding student behaviors, what students remember from the plays, and what feedback (both explicit and implicit) students offer about the intervention. Finally, I will conduct a survey via Google Forms upon the completion of the program. Teachers will be asked to reflect on changes in student behavior over the course of the summer and will be asked to assess the efficacy of various specific program elements (i.e. songs, pre-performance improvisation, roleplay activities, prop boxes for students to interact with, repeated phrases, etc.). I will use qualitative theme coding to analyze this data and present the findings in my final paper (Xu & Zammit 2020).

The weekly feedback will also play a critical role in the adaptation process. We will continually consider my observations and co-facilitators' observations, data from teacher interviews, and information from students to identify ways that the program might improve. Embracing the principles of action research, I will adjust our structures and content to reflect students' specific needs and excitements as the intervention progresses.

What timeline will you follow to achieve your goals?

In advance of the summer, I will:

- Conduct the early assessment of needs with program staff
- Obtain consent from parents/guardians
- Hire actors
- Continue to read existing publications on theater for SEL and interventions for improved emotion identification and expression
- Continue to read research on best practices for theater for young audiences

June 2-7: I will prepare the first draft of my literature review and draft an outline of the curriculum/scripts.

June 9-14: I will write and rehearse the first piece. I will also begin embedded time in the classrooms, developing relationships with staff and students, and acquire/construct set, props, and costumes.

Week 3-7 (June 16-July 19): Each week, I will perform one piece, write/rehearse the next week's piece, conduct teacher interviews, and engage in embedded time in the classrooms. Specifically, the following new topics will be introduced:

June 16-21: Emotion identification (happy, sad, angry)

June 23-28: Emotion identification (excited, scared)

June 30-July 5: Self-regulation strategies

July 7-12: Co-regulation strategies

July 14-19: Helping others with big feelings

July 21-26: We will present the final piece, which synthesizes the ideas covered across the previous sessions. I will also complete my embedded time in the classrooms and conduct my final teacher interviews.

July 28-August 2: I will conduct the staff survey to collect data about teacher perceptions of the program. I will analyze and cross-analyze all data and prepare a manuscript in which I present the study's purpose, design, and findings.

August 4-9: I will complete the manuscript and seek publication venues. This may take additional time depending on the number of publication venues that I need to pursue.

What support will you have while working as an independent Steen Fellow?

I will have the support and accountability of my co-facilitators. My project involves two other actors, who will be able to support me in the development of the pieces themselves. I will also be working alongside a team of preschool teachers employed by the site and center directors at both locations. The Little Tigers staff will help me identify students' needs, assess what is/is not working, and guide students toward appropriate engagement with the pieces. I will also have the support of Associate Professor of Education Jill Watson. While I will complete the project independent of her mentorship, she has provided me with support on this project since its inception and has expressed willingness to continue to do so if I am awarded the Steen Fellowship.

What relevant coursework and/or other experiences have prepared you to complete this project? Extensive experience with education (including early childhood education), theater, and writing uniquely prepares me for this endeavor.

First, I have a longstanding interest in theater for young audiences. I conducted an independent study on the subject in high school, for which I wrote, rehearsed, and performed an original play based on a Yoruba folktale, worked as the artistic/technical direction intern at a local children's theater, and read several books about the theory and practice of creating theater for young people. Inspired by this experience, I founded Central Iowa Touring Ensemble, a non-profit devoted to spreading empathy in Iowa's schools and communities through musical theater. I served as the managing director of the company for four years before moving to Minnesota; the company reached thousands of elementary school students under my leadership, many of whom did not have the means to watch theater outside of school. In this role, I was responsible for arranging all funding, developing schedules, coordinating with schools, managing advertising, all communication amongst ensemble members and with the community, developing the concept for each show, motivating and unifying ensemble members, staging each production, and more. I cannot imagine an experience that could more thoroughly equip me for both the artistic and the logistical demands of this action research project. My passion for theater for young audiences has not faded; I have continued to attend

seminars, watch theater for young audiences, and read books and articles about best practices for writing and directing TYA during my time at St. Olaf. I also have experience as a playwright, director, actor, and theatrical designer, which will equip me to successfully fulfill the artistic demands of this project.

I am majoring in English and Education, and my coursework in both departments has equipped me to write engaging works that effectively educate students. In "The Craft of Creative Writing," for instance, I learned how to construct more concise and gripping dialogue, characters, and plots. I was encouraged to step out of my comfort zone and try new writing practices, leading me to a more bold and stylistically diverse approach that will appeal to a young audience with diverse interests and preferred modes of learning. "Theater in London" gave me the opportunity to study theater through the lens of a literary scholar, offering fresh insights into the process of bringing a work from page to stage. "American Racial and Multicultural Literature" helped me think critically about how literary works enfranchise and disenfranchise demographic groups. As I attempt to reach all of the unique students at Little Tigers, I will use learnings from this course to appeal to students with diverse cultural identities, family situations, and nationalities.

My Education coursework and hands-on experience with young people will likely be the most helpful of all as I complete this project. After this semester, I will have completed all of the Education courses required for licensure except those associated with student teaching. "Foundations of Education" helped me think critically about my own identity, students' identities, and how I can incorporate the Culturally Responsive and Sustaining teaching framework to welcome students who have often been failed by our educational system. "Planning, Instruction, and Assessment" was a practical class that taught me best practices in lesson planning, unit planning, determining students' levels of knowledge, and explaining concepts with clarity. This course equipped me to craft lessons that build on one another to help students achieve objectives, use pre-assessments, formative assessments, and summative assessments to get a sense of students' ability levels, and present information clearly to students of varying ages. "Teaching of Communication Arts/Literature," "Teaching Reading," and "Teaching Grammar" all offered me more sustained practice with lesson and unit planning in specific classroom contexts. "Differentiating Instruction" was also a particularly relevant course. At Little Tigers, I will work with students with physical disabilities, learning disabilities, and varied language abilities. This course focused on how to adjust instructional modes to ensure that disabled students, English language learners, and refugee students get the tools they need for success. I will incorporate these practices as I construct the plays, adjusting opportunities for audience interaction to accommodate specific students' needs.

My experiences with young people in the classroom have taught me how to meet students' needs and connect with young people in practice. Before coming to St. Olaf, I was an employee of Little Tigers, the site for this project. I served as the preschool/school-age program coordinator at the Gilbert location; in this role, I guided children ages 3-10 through formative years, working as the lead teacher in the preschool (ages 3-5) and after school (5-10) programs. I developed and taught curriculum and was responsible for training and developing resources to equip the assistant teachers in my building. This experience gave me a great deal of experience with this project's target age group, including experience with lesson planning, full-class instruction, differentiation for particular students, and relationship building. After my work at Little Tigers, I spent a summer as the education intern at Story Theater Company, where I taught theater workshops for students ages 4-18. I helped develop and taught the company's first programming for 4-5 year old students. I also applied culturally responsive teaching strategies to create a restorative and student-first model for classroom management. After observing my work, the company's education director invited me to author a new section of their training manual on encouraging positive behaviors in young learners. I will carry the same approach into my work on this project, creating an environment that prepares students for success as they practice social-emotional skills. Currently, I am working at Nerstrand Elementary School as the K-5 music and theater teacher. During my two years at the school, I have been responsible for developing an original curriculum for grades K-5. Every time that I teach, I learn more about how to help young people focus, feel comfortable with failure, actively engage, and build community. I am excited to carry all of these learnings into my work this summer; the same practices that allow me to engage and teach kindergartners in the music classroom equip me to create engaging, educational theater for 3-5 year old students at Little Tigers.

How will this project enhance your academic studies, personal development and career discernment? I am excited to work as an English teacher after graduating from St. Olaf. In my courses on English teaching methods, I have learned that roleplay activities are effective instructional tools in the English classroom, especially for students

with limited literacy. This project will give me hands-on experience in designing such activities; if my work this summer demonstrates that theater-based practices are effective and feasible in the classroom, I will be eager to apply them in my own classroom after graduation.

While I am eager to start my career as a teacher, I also know that many facets of the K-12 education landscape excite me. I am interested in work as an administrator or social-emotional education coordinator later in my career. I am also interested in the possibility of eventually moving outside of the school system itself and conducting research and teacher trainings to improve students' educational outcomes. This project will allow me to further my academic interest in social-emotional learning and help me consider whether work as a social-emotional education coordinator might appeal to me. Most immediately, it will give me hands-on experience with research. I hope that my experience this summer will help me discern whether I want to pursue a career in research/higher education after spending some time as a classroom teacher.

How is this project specifically related to your major(s)? This project sits at the intersection of my majors, Education and English, as it allows me to create literary works with an educational aim. In my English courses, I have developed creative writing and literary analysis skills that equip me to craft plays that captivate young audiences. In my Education courses, I have learned that social-emotional learning is a critical need in schools and have studied best practices for helping students develop empathy, a strong self-concept, self-regulation and co-regulation skills, and openness to new ideas. This project uniquely brings these disciplines into conversation, using literature as an intervention to stimulate students' social-emotional growth.

Number of hours per week you plan to spend on your project. 45

Number of weeks your project is expected to last. 10

Explanation and break down of anticipated expenses (e.g. supplies, travel to research site, conference registration). Travel expenses – While facilitating this project, I will live approximately three miles away from the Gilbert, Iowa Little Tigers location. This means, however, that I will live approximately 55 miles away from the Adel, Iowa location. I plan to bike to the Gilbert location, but I expect to travel via car to Adel two times per week (once for the intervention itself and once for embedded time as a volunteer teacher). Thus, I expect approximately \$150 in travel expenses.

Access to paid articles – \$300

Actors stipends – Professor Jill Dietz advised that I could use this budget to pay actors with proper documentation. I plan to pay the two actors \$100 per week for seven weeks (June 9-July 25), totaling \$1400.

Set and costumes – While set and costumes will be minimal, I do intend to purchase certain critical items, especially textured costume pieces for characters that are animals. I expect to spend \$100 on set and costumes.

Props – I will assemble bags of props for students to interact with at designated points in the performances. This will cost approximately \$200.

Interpreter services – Little Tigers informed me that they do not currently have any families that do not speak English. In the event that this changes before my project is complete, I would like to budget \$100 for interpreter services.

Conference registration – \$300 (Depending on which of the conferences I end up presenting at, I may also need to use some of my stipend for registration/travel expenses.)

Total dollar amount needed for expenses. 2550

Total stipend requested. The total stipend you may request is up to \$3,000 for at least 225 hours of work.
2450 (450 hours)

Total stipend or wages expected from another source.

Are you pursuing additional funding related to your project, please report the source, anticipated amount, and the date you will learn if you are successful.

Will the project involve anyone you are related to? If yes, explain. No

How will you conduct your project in an appropriate, professional, ethical and safe manner? As part of your response please describe specific tools and/or resources you will employ to meet appropriate standards and expectations. I will use an informed consent form, translated and interpreted as needed, to ensure that all families at Little Tigers understand and consent to the details of the study. The forms will detail the goals and practices associated with the study and explain that students will be quoted and referenced in a final paper without identifying information. I will also provide a more thorough explanation of the project's goals and methods in a recorded presentation, which each location's director will send to parents/guardians via email.

Confidentiality will be maintained in all of my writings. Students and teachers will be referred to without identifying information except (if necessary) the age level that a teacher interacts with and possible references to gender. I will use pseudonyms when referring to particular students.

The co-facilitating actors and I will also follow Little Tigers' volunteer policies. We will complete a volunteer form for screening (which Little Tigers uses in place of a background check), sign in and out each time we visit, and never be alone with students. We will also implement our own policy that we never make physical contact with students.

I have completed several trainings for work with 3-5 year old students; for example, I am certified by School Age Matters and trained to facilitate sexual assault prevention training for minors. I will lead trainings with my co-facilitating actors to ensure that we utilize best practices for student safety.

My embedded time in the classrooms also ensures ethical completion of this study. Rather than entering the space as an external interventionist without genuine connection to the students, I will build positive relationships with the students and integrate myself into their lives and routines.

How will you manage your time? This project will be my main priority during its duration; it will be my full-time job. Outside of this, I will be involved in a local church and will assist Professor Jill Watson with her research (roughly 10 hours per week) as an unpaid research assistant. I plan to work on my Steen Fellowship project Monday-Saturday from 7:00-5:00. My commitments as a research assistant and church member will take place on evenings and Sundays.

If you are pursuing additional funding related to your project, please report the source and the date you will learn if you are successful.

Please describe your specific plans for sharing the results of your work to a broader community of scholars and or citizens. I intend to disseminate my paper in a journal that is committed to action research in social-emotional education. Specifically, I plan to submit my work to Education Action Research, a journal with a demonstrated commitment to narrative action research on similar arts-based interventions.

I also intend to present at a conference on social-emotional education or theater-based education. Specifically, I plan to submit my work to University of Northern Iowa's Social and Emotional Learning Conference, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education Annual Conference, and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research.

On campus, I am on the Aspiring Educators executive board; I will prepare an on-campus presentation of my findings for students and faculty and present it through Aspiring Educators.

I will also publish the plays' scripts on New Play Exchange, where I already have an account as playwright. This will allow other theatermakers to use the scripts as written or as a framework for their own work.

How will you manage your time? This project will be my main priority during its duration; it will be my full-time job. Outside of this, I will be involved in a local church and will assist Professor Jill Watson with her research (roughly 10 hours per week) as an unpaid research assistant. I plan to work on my Steen Fellowship project Monday-Saturday from 7:00-5:00. My commitments as a research assistant and church member will take place on evenings and Sundays.

Please describe your specific plans for sharing the results of your work to a broader community of scholars

and or citizens. I intend to disseminate my paper in a journal that is committed to action research in social-emotional education. Specifically, I plan to submit my work to Education Action Research, a journal with a demonstrated commitment to narrative action research on similar arts-based interventions.

I also intend to present at a conference on social-emotional education or theater-based education. Specifically, I plan to submit my work to University of Northern Iowa's Social and Emotional Learning Conference, the National Association for the Education of Young Children Annual Conference, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education Annual Conference, and the National Conference on Undergraduate Research.

On campus, I am on the Aspiring Educators executive board; I will prepare an on-campus presentation of my findings for students and faculty and present it through Aspiring Educators.

I will also publish the plays' scripts on New Play Exchange, where I already have an account as playwright. This will allow other theatermakers to use the scripts as written or as a framework for their own work.

Does your project involve collecting or analyzing information about human subjects? Yes

If you answered "yes," explain what type of inquiry (Type 1, 2 or 3) your project involves and why. You need not prepare a complete Institutional Review Board application unless your project is funded, but you should be familiar with the application requirements and process. Type 3 -- My project participants are minors, a population identified as vulnerable.

Who will submit a letter of support for your project (preferably a faculty member)? Jill Watson