

METHOD GUIDE

Art Education Laboratories | Slovenia

Pionirski dom – Center za kulturo mladih



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KULTURO MLADIH

MIND
GAP | **THE**

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MIND
THE
GAP



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Mestna občina
Ljubljana

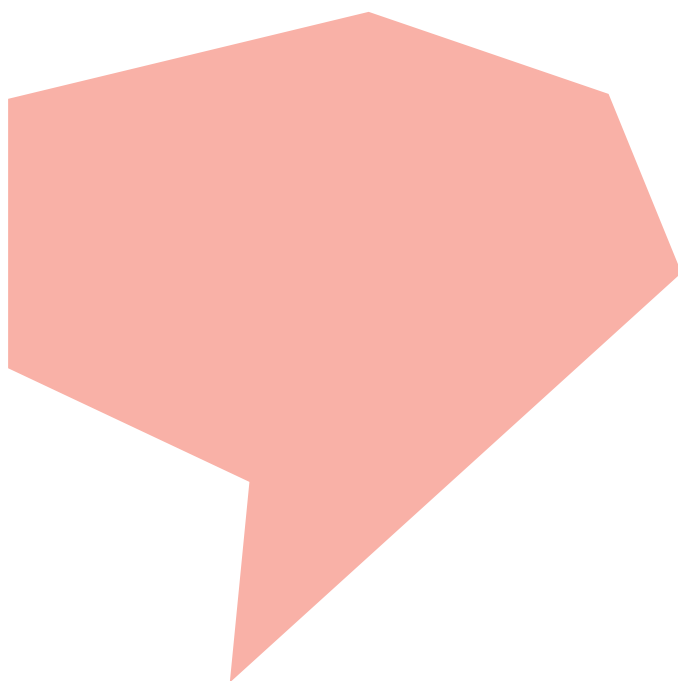


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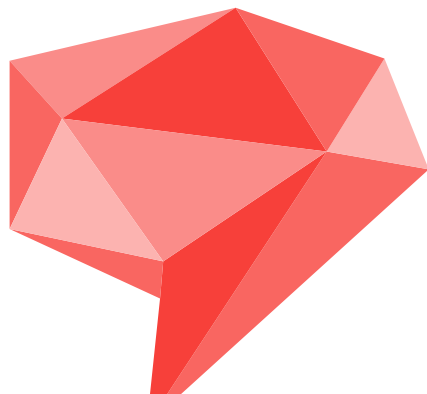
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Why This Method Guide?

At Pionirski dom, we want the methods we develop through our daily work with young people to reach as many people as possible – especially those who can use them in their own settings. That is why we collaborate with schools, cultural institutions, organisations, and experts both at home and abroad. Through these partnerships, we enhance our approaches, try them out in different contexts, and adapt them so they are clear, practical and easy to apply elsewhere.

This method guide was created as part of the Mind the Gap project, which we introduce in more detail in the next chapter. It is intended for anyone seeking more tools and ideas for processes that encourage young people to express themselves, collaborate, take initiative and develop skills and relationships that matter for their future. We believe that such approaches can play an important role in creating environments that support young people – and, in turn, the wider community.



ABOUT THE MIND THE GAP PROJECT

Mind the Gap is a project designed to strengthen arts and cultural education by developing innovative learning laboratories and increasing the cultural participation of children and young people across Europe. It promotes cross-sector collaboration between culture and education and addresses challenges related to the well-being of children and youth.

A consortium of four cultural institutions is responding to shared European challenges such as mental health issues among children and young people, social exclusion, and growing societal divides. The project understands these shared concerns as “gaps” – gaps in ensuring every child’s right to culture, gaps in cross-sector cooperation between education and culture, and gaps in society more broadly. By identifying and addressing these issues, the project directly supports the priority of social inclusion.

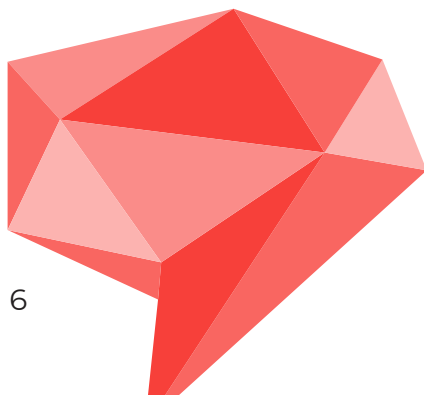
Since these challenges manifest differently in each national context, all partners are developing their own approaches through diverse arts education laboratories. In Slovenia, the focus is on connecting performing arts, contemporary dance, and improvisational theatre with the field of mental health. The added European value lies in exchanging creative methods and in the shared evaluation and monitoring of the laboratories. The ultimate aim is to provide tools that help improve

the well-being and self-expression of children, young people, and educators.

The project creates opportunities for networking and helping professionals strengthen their skills and abilities in education and culture. These efforts are supported by national and international events, as well as manuals featuring adaptable methods published in the partner countries' languages and in English.

The methodological manuals and the Mind the Gap project were produced with the support of the European Union. Mind the Gap (November 2024 – August 2026) is coordinated by the Association of Children's Culture in Finland. The project partners are Kulturtanken (Norway), the Małopolska Institute of Culture in Kraków (Poland), and Pionirski dom – Center za kulturo mladih (Slovenia).

MIND
GAP | **THE**



OUR STARTING POINTS:



1. Every child can demonstrate their abilities and be successful.
2. With appropriate support and personal motivation, all educators can acquire additional knowledge and methods from the fields of the arts and mental health, which help them in working with diverse children and in addressing a variety of situations.
3. A prerequisite for any successful teaching method is the establishment of an interpersonal relationship between the child and the educator.
4. Integrating diverse forms of expression into the educational process can help ensure that every child finds an area in which they are strong and successful.
5. Both children and adults learn and connect with one another more easily in environments that are recognised as safe, as such environments allow more space for imperfection, mistakes, and vulnerability.



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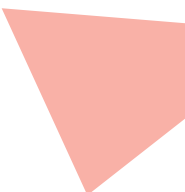
1. SELF-REGULATION – THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL WORK

Adults as the Foundation of a Child's Inner Balance

Self-regulation is a core psychological skill that allows an individual to recognize, understand, and manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. How an adult regulates themselves strongly influences the way they engage in relationships – both with themselves and with others. Adults who can stay connected to their inner self, even under stress, are better able to maintain stability, set boundaries, and cultivate relationships grounded in safety and trust.

In education and child development, adult self-regulation is particularly crucial. Children and adolescents grow not in isolation but within various relationships. These relationships with adults are gradually internalized, shaping the child's inner world, forming their inner voice, fostering self-worth, and establishing foundational attitudes toward themselves and others – attitudes that continue into adulthood. Parents, caregivers, and educators play a central role in this process, as their presence and the way they relate to children actively shape the child's emotional and psychological experiences.

Developmental psychology and neuroscience research shows that self-regulation is not innate but develops through relationships. Children first learn to regulate themselves through co-regulation with adults who are emotionally present, attuned, and internally stable. These adults provide not only rules and guidance but, more importantly, the experience that emotions are understandable, acceptable, and manageable.



The Challenges of the Contemporary Educational Environment

In today's society, children and adolescents are increasingly facing various forms of distress. Anxiety, difficulties in relationships, feelings of failure, low self-esteem, and overload are becoming common in everyday school life. At the same time, professional support is limited. There are too few therapists and mental health specialists, waiting times are long, and distress happens in real time – in the classroom, during lessons, and among peers.

In this context, teachers often become the first adults to notice a child's struggle. While this is not their primary role, they are expected to respond with understanding, empathy, and the ability to manage emotionally charged situations. Yet, teachers often lack sufficient systemic support, time, space and training to do so effectively.

Teachers Today: Between Vocation and Overload

Teaching is no longer just about imparting knowledge. Teachers navigate a complex web of relationships, emotions, expectations, and pressures. With growing demands and responsibilities, feelings of empowerment often decrease, contributing to declining interest in the profession. Working conditions are challenging, emotional demands are high, and opportunities for recovery are limited.

For teachers to build safe and supportive relationships with students, they must also have access to support, understanding, and opportunities to develop their own self-regulation skills. This is not about expecting more from teach-

ers, but about equipping them with new approaches and practical tools.

Experiences from the MTG project highlight that teachers need encouragement and support to:

- explore alternative approaches in a safe environment,
- gain tools to understand classroom dynamics,
- and embrace a mindset that values relationships over perfection.

A key goal of the MTG project is for the activities and approaches introduced by creativity and mental health specialists to continue in schools through teachers even after the project team has moved on. Providing diverse experiences in arts education, with a focus on understanding self-regulation, creates a framework in which prevention is not a one-time intervention but an ongoing experience of connection, safety, and shared learning that benefits both students and teachers.

Safety and Positive Authority

A sense of safety is fundamental to growth and relationship-building. Without it, learning, personal growth, self-actualization, and healthy self-esteem cannot occur. Positive authority is built on connection, clarity, and respect – not fear or control. A child who feels heard, acknowledged, and seen has no need to resist unnecessarily. Behaviours often labeled as problematic are frequently expressions of basic human needs for recognition and connection.

Art and Non-formal Learning as a Space for Connection

Art provides a unique space where relationships can be established safely and without pressure. Through the creative process, symbolic and non-verbal forms of expression open up, allowing children to communicate in ways that words often cannot. Artistic activities support emotional regulation, foster a sense of acceptance, and create experiences of safety without fear of making mistakes.

For many years, Pionirski dom has operated at the intersection of art, culture and education. In this space, we see the potential to meaningfully connect non-formal learning with the formal school environment – not as a replacement for professional support, but as a way to help teachers and children build the relationships that form the foundation of healthy development.

Through the work with children and young people in non-formal settings, our educators have observed that when supported by a creative and safe environment, children become more confident, strengthen their voice and self-expression, and gain empowerment in collaboration and forming connections with others.

For this reason, within the Mind the Gap project, through which this method guide was developed, we sought to share our creative practices and approaches to creating safe spaces and building connections with young people with teachers, and through them bring these approaches into schools. We believe that teachers, who reach the largest number of children and young people, can, by incorporating creative activities, strengthen both the mental and overall well-being of students, as well as their own professional authority and capacity.

2. CULTURAL AND ARTISTIC PRACTICES – THE WELL-BEING OF YOUNG PEOPLE AND EDUCATORS

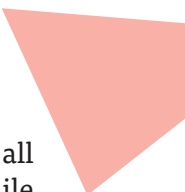
In the year before the implementation of the MTG project began, the document *Common Goals and Their Integration into Curricula and Catalogues of Knowledge* was published as part of the national curriculum reform (National Education Institute Slovenia, 2023). The document introduces common goals for primary schools and grammar schools organised into several areas: language, citizenship, culture and the arts, sustainable development, health and well-being, digital competence, and entrepreneurship. These goals are implemented across different subjects and through a variety of approaches.

Among the objectives outlined in the document, two are particularly relevant and fully aligned with the aims of our work:

- mental and social well-being as part of the school's responsibility, and
- arts and culture as a space of experience, expression and connection with the wider community.

Mental and Social Well-Being: A Responsibility of the Whole School

The document defines the school's role very clearly: in addition to supporting students in achieving academic goals, schools must systematically teach students how to care for their own mental,



physical, and social well-being. This should take place across all subjects and through appropriate teaching approaches, while creating a safe and supportive learning environment.

Schools are encouraged to strengthen mental well-being through activities that foster self-awareness, self-regulation, goal setting and monitoring, flexible thinking, as well as responsibility and autonomy.

Social well-being, in turn, should be supported through the development of social awareness and understanding of diversity, communication skills, conflict resolution, empathy, and prosocial behaviour as the basis for healthy interpersonal relationships.

This framework directly supports the core of the MTG project activities: creating a school environment where students learn not only academic content but also – through experience – develop their relationship with themselves, with others, and with the wider community.

Culture and the Arts: Experience, Expression, and a Safe Environment

Another key pillar of the document is the field of culture and the arts. Among its central goals are developing a meaningful relationship with artistic experience, encouraging expression and curiosity, fostering enjoyment of the creative process, and above all ensuring a safe learning environment in which students can “freely express their ideas and realise their creative intentions.”

Particularly valuable is the emphasis that students should “live culture and the arts”, and that schools should develop themselves as cultural hubs that actively connect with the wider cultural and social environment.

This creates a clear curricular foundation for linking formal and non-formal learning and for cooperation between schools and cultural institutions, artists, and educators – partnerships that can further support teachers' work and offer students access to diverse learning experiences.

Cross-Sector Collaboration as Good Practice and a Path Forward

In addressing health and well-being, the document focuses not only on topics but also on the ways of working. It supports the understanding that holistic well-being can be developed systematically across all subjects while highlighting the importance of professional development and expert support within schools.

For this reason, it is important that teachers' activities are coordinated within a whole-school, strategic, and comprehensive approach that involves all educational staff and students and is carried out regularly and systematically.

Based on the principles outlined in the document, several key points can be highlighted that are also aligned with the implementation of the MTG project in schools:

- the project supports teachers rather than replacing them, and does not add “another task” to their workload but offers new approaches and support,
- it enables the transfer of methods aligned with school goals – a flexible set of exercises that teachers can learn and apply directly in their work,

- it helps build a shared language across different professional fields, something that is increasingly necessary in complex classroom environments, while fostering shared responsibility for the well-being of children and young people.

The practices tested within the MTG project laboratories are therefore fully aligned with the directions set by the Slovenian education sector. They offer a range of activities across different fields that can support these important cross-curricular goals.

In the following chapters of this method guide, we will describe in more detail why we chose these particular artistic disciplines and outline the key principles that guided our approach to meaningful and high-quality work with young people.



3. PREVENTION ALONE DOES NOT WORK: THE IMPORTANCE OF BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS



In recent years, an increasing number of preventive programs, workshops, and materials have appeared in the field of mental health, both in schools and outside them. This is an important shift: society is recognizing mental well-being as both a value and a responsibility. At the same time, experience shows that more prevention does not automatically lead to a greater impact on mental or social well-being.

This phenomenon, described as the “preventive paradox,” was highlighted by Dr. Helena Jeriček Klanšček from the Slovenian National Institute of Public Health (NIJZ), who emphasized the need to lay strong foundations when introducing certain methods. Without these foundations, their effect can be minimal. In line with this, mental health expert Drago Švajger, a member of the team delivering school workshops, stressed that programs do not work if the prerequisite of a relationship between participants and facilitators or instructors is not met.

In schools, this paradox often appears like this: a programme may be excellent in content – addressing issues such as stress, relationships, or peer violence – but it fails to “take in” the classroom if the delivery is too fast, too short, too generic, or if students do not feel safe enough to participate. Sometimes the opposite effect occurs: rather than relief, resistance emerges (“just another workshop”), or sensitive topics are raised without sufficient support.

Prerequisite: Connection, Safety, and Space to Explore

At MTG, we start from a simple yet crucial principle: a method is first and foremost a relationship, not a technique. Preventive content is effective only when participants, such as students, adolescents, and even teachers, feel safe enough to:

- participate without fear of judgment,
- take risks and make mistakes,
- explore different possibilities, and
- reveal (at least partly) who they really are.

Achieving this requires a facilitator or educator capable of establishing connection, maintaining boundaries, managing group dynamics, and remaining human and stable even in the face of restlessness, teasing, provocation, or silence.

The Role of a Mental Health Expert as a Co-Creator of a Safe Process

In creative movement and improvisational theatre activities, the presence of a mental health professional proved essential in the MTG project. Not as someone who “fixes,” diagnoses, or judges, but as a co-creator of the process, supporting the safety, understanding, and balance of the group through their knowledge and presence.

One key insight from the project was that how we work is just as important as what we do. In this context, the mental health expert does not act as an external authority, but as someone who

helps hold the space: observing group dynamics, recognizing boundaries, assisting in calming intense responses, and supporting self-regulation processes for both students and adults.

Why Cross-Sector Collaboration Matters: Quality of Implementation as Part of Prevention

If relationship-building is the prerequisite, it becomes clear why cross-sector collaboration is so important for school-based prevention. Schools maintain daily contact with children and adolescents but often lack the time, support, or specialized expertise to develop certain practices (e.g., body-based work, improvisational methods, or facilitation of processes that open personal topics). The cultural and creative sector, together with mental health experts, brings complementary approaches and experience – especially in creating safe spaces, working with expression, and managing group dynamics.

MTG can thus be understood as a response to the preventive paradox: we do not add “just another programme,” but instead build the conditions under which programs can truly be effective:

- establishing connection and relationships,
- fostering a sense of safety,
- providing clear structure,
- setting goals through repeated experiences (which is why teacher reinforcement is essential), and
- using methods that enable experiential learning (not just a discussion).

4. CREATIVE MOVEMENT AND THE BODY



Why Creative Movement Is a Valuable Classroom Method

The body is the first space where tension, safety, discomfort, excitement and stress are expressed. Before a child or adolescent can put their experiences into words, they are often already carried in the body through restlessness, withdrawal, hyperactivity or stillness. Creative movement offers one of the most direct yet gentle ways to connect with oneself.

In the classroom, the body is often pushed to the background. Sitting and cognitive efforts dominate, while bodily responses – restlessness, fatigue, tension – are quickly interpreted as “problematic.” Creative movement reverses this dynamic: the body becomes a source of information, not a problem to control.

As Ana Romih, a dance educator and a member of the school workshop team, emphasizes, creative movement is not based on correctness or aesthetic ideals, but on authentic, intuitive movement. This absence of right or wrong creates a non-judgmental space where students can begin to notice their own feelings, boundaries, and needs. Over time, this fosters kinaesthetic self-awareness – the ability to perceive internal bodily signals, which is crucial for recognizing stress, anxiety and overload.

Creative movement also acts as an outlet for emotions that are difficult to verbalize. This is especially important during adolescence, when emotions are often intense and confusing. Movement allows expression without the pressure to explain.

in. Different movement rhythms, intensities and qualities help release the tension and gradually calm down the nervous system. This directly supports self-regulation processes, which are foundational for mental well-being.

Another important aspect of creative movement is the relationship with one's body. When the focus shifts from outward appearance to internal experience, comparison and shame decrease. Students begin to perceive their bodies as allies rather than objects of judgment. This has long-term benefits for self-esteem and confidence and acts preventively against various body-mind challenges.

In a group setting, creative movement adds another crucial dimension: learning through observation. Watching different ways of moving helps students develop acceptance of diversity and empathy. Group movement activities foster a sense of belonging while allowing individual expression. This balance between the individual and the group is one of the key qualities of creative movement as a classroom method.

For all these reasons, creative movement in schools is not merely a "physical activity." It is a method that integrates physical, emotional and social dimensions, and so creating the conditions for safely exploring oneself and the world.

5. IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE AND CONNECTION



Why Improvisational Theatre Is an Effective Method

If creative movement opens space for connecting with oneself, improvisational theatre opens space for connecting with others. A classroom is not just a collection of individuals but a complex social system in which relationships, roles, power dynamics and expectations intertwine. Class cohesion is often taken for granted, yet in practice it requires intentional cultivation.

Improvisational theatre is highly effective precisely because collaboration is built into its core. Without listening, responsiveness and acceptance of others, improv simply doesn't work. Every exercise or game requires being present, being aware of the group and being willing to adapt to what is unfolding – without losing one's sense of self.

As Veronika Hana Grubič, theatre educator and member of the workshop team, explains, improv exercises allow themes that are otherwise difficult to access (relationships, conflict, self-image, violence) to surface in a playful and safe way. The element of play creates enough distance to reduce defensive reactions, while giving participants an embodied experience and offering educators insight into what matters to students, which strategies they use and where they may need additional support. Students find it easier to participate, share opinions and talk about experiences because they are not placed in a direct spotlight.

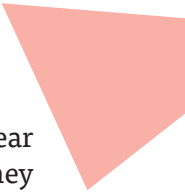
In recent years, improv exercises have increasingly been used as a tool for developing social competencies. They help students cultivate openness and acceptance, cooperation skills, a sense of community, empathy and the ability to truly listen. At the same time, they stimulate creativity, mental flexibility, and contribute to building a safe learning environment. For these reasons, they serve as a valuable bridge between artistic practice and pedagogical work in the classroom.

Another key aspect of improvisational methods is their focus on the learning process. Improv is not about performing a task “correctly” but about exploring possibilities. The teacher or facilitator does not assess whether something was done the “right” way; instead, they observe collaboration, responses, listening and co-creation. Attempts, mistakes and unexpected reactions are understood as a natural part of learning that opens space for reflection and the emergence of new ideas.

One of the central strengths of improvisational theatre is its approach to mistakes. A mistake is not something to avoid, but a necessary part of the process. This perspective encourages reflection, adaptability and personal growth. Students learn that mistakes are not signs of failure but sources of information about how we think, make decisions and solve problems. Facing mistakes fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, resilience and confidence. When mistakes are seen as part of the learning journey, fear of failure decreases and willingness to explore grows.

In improv, mistakes often hold creative potential. Much like in evolutionary processes, where unexpected changes open new possibilities, an improvised “mistake” can shift the direction of a scene or even inspire an entirely new exercise.

This understanding relieves students of the pressure to be perfect and creates an environment where trying is allowed, risk is acceptable and imperfection is human. Improv exercises also sys-



tematically develop communication skills: active listening, clear expression, reading non-verbal cues and resolving conflict. They cultivate empathy, as participants step into different roles and perspectives. In this way, the classroom becomes a place where relationships are not only happening but are consciously learned.

A significant part of this work is the spatial organization of the learning process. Improv activities often use a circle formation, which creates a different dynamic than traditional classroom seating. A circle encourages more equal communication: everyone can see one another, eye contact is easier and participation becomes more active. This arrangement reduces hierarchical distance between the teacher and students, strengthens the sense of community, and supports active listening and mutual understanding.

The circle also provides more room for movement, interaction and participatory activities. Learning thus becomes not only intellectual but also embodied. Research shows that the more sensory and physical input is involved, the stronger the memory and the deeper the understanding. Improv activities therefore broaden the concept of learning, which is often reduced in school settings to mental tasks alone.

Workshop experiences show that such methods have a significant impact on group dynamics. Teachers observed that, in a circle, even students who often go unnoticed in traditional seating became more visible. Students who usually don't socialise took part in activities and those who rarely participate in regular lessons showed more interest. These shifts suggest that even a simple change in spatial setup and activity structure can meaningfully influence the classroom climate.

Improvisational theatre thus functions as a laboratory of relationships: a safe space where students can try out ways of connecting, communicating and collaborating – skills they later carry into everyday school life and beyond.



6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATORS

Be Open to All Topics: Maintaining Balance and Highlighting Positive Moments

Difficult topics such as conflict, violence, feelings of inferiority, fear or sadness may arise spontaneously – especially when a safe space is created. It is therefore an important part of professional support for educators to maintain balance. When addressing challenging content, the group should consciously seek sources of strength, enjoyable experiences, moments of success, humour, connection and fulfilment. Mental health is not the absence of problems, but the ability to navigate different states and the sense that we possess tools to cope with them.

This approach is particularly important in schools, where an excessive focus on “problems” can unintentionally reinforce feelings of helplessness. The Mind the Gap project deliberately also seeks out positive points: individual strengths, small achievements, a sense of shared rhythm and satisfaction from collaboration.

Don't Be Afraid to Give Praise: Supporting the Development of Self-Worth

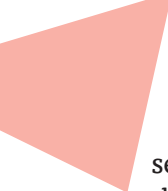
Praise plays a crucial role in the healthy psychological development of children. When children feel recognized, heard and valued, their self-esteem and sense of self-worth grow. These experiences form the foundation for developing inner security,



self-confidence, and, later, a healthy and stable adult personality. In schools, this is often overlooked. Expectations are high, and grades often become the main measure of success. As a result, children begin to base their sense of worth primarily on external achievements such as grades and results. They increasingly compare themselves to others, which encourages competitiveness and, at times, envy. This creates a conditional self-image: “I am worthy and valuable only when I am the best or achieve excellent results.” One consequence is the experience of conditional acceptance – feeling accepted only when performing at one’s highest level. Children may also engage in unhealthy comparisons, ridicule or exclusion of those “less successful.” All this can lead to shame or feelings of inferiority when they do not achieve the same results as their peers.

While effort and perseverance are important, children also need experiences of unconditional recognition and encouragement for healthy development. Praise that acknowledges effort, personal qualities, progress or attitude toward others helps build an internal sense of worth. This nurtures a feeling of inner strength, confidence and reinforces the understanding: “I am good enough as I am.” This unconditional self-worth is a key foundation for healthy self-confidence, stability and well-being. It helps children see themselves in a more well-rounded way – not only through grades and achievements but also through their personality, behaviour, values and relationships. Focusing solely on academic performance impoverishes our understanding of child development, as it overlooks crucial aspects of personal growth that shape a healthy identity.

Praise is also important for small steps that adults may take for granted. For example, when a child brings a neatly organized notebook to school after a long time, an adult might assume this should have been done earlier and may not offer praise. Yet it is precisely in these moments that the child needs acknowledgment of their effort and change. Praise awakens strong feelings: the child feels



seen, noticed and accepted, giving them a sense of importance and the feeling that someone cares.

It's important to remember that not all children have these kinds of experiences at home. Some may come from environments with limited support, understanding, or emotional safety. For them, school can become one of the few places where they feel recognized and accepted. Praise should never be overlooked – it's essential for healthy development. Adults benefit from it, too. When given sincerely to children, praise can even change how adults see themselves, helping them be less critical, more understanding and more compassionate. A self-aware, self-regulated adult is better equipped to support a self-regulated child, since children often mirror and rely on the adults around them. In this way, we support not only the children, but also ourselves and the connections we build with others.

Take Part in the Exercises: Equality as a Foundation for Trust

In practice, it has proven very effective for facilitators to take part as participants themselves. When a mental health professional, a creative movement educator, and an improvisational theatre educator joined the Mind the Gap exercises—making mistakes, laughing, and problem-solving alongside the group—the sense of hierarchy eased. The class or group got a clear message: no one is “above” the process; we are all part of it.

This approach has many benefits. Students feel more comfortable taking risks because they see that adults don't have all the answers and that it's okay to be imperfect. It also builds trust, as the educator is not just observing or evaluating, but actively participating and connecting with the students. This sense of equality encourages genuine engagement between students and educators.

For teachers, this is especially important. Showing oneself as a person with limits, questions, and occasional mistakes doesn't weaken authority; in fact, it often strengthens a positive, relationship-based authority. Active participation in workshops shows students that learning can be engaging and inclusive. By contributing creatively themselves, educators model experimentation and inspire children to explore new ideas.

A key insight from the Mind the Gap project is that creative workshops naturally bring energy and noise. In a school setting that can sometimes feel like a loss of control. This is where the distinction between chaos and lively group dynamics becomes clear. When educators maintain structure without demanding silence, the class gradually self-regulates. Students learn a shared rhythm, patience and adaptability – the essence of true collaboration.



Giving Feedback to Students: Fostering Creativity

1. **Praise effort and progress, not just results:** Emphasize the importance of exploring and trying new things, regardless of the outcome. Praise for effort and creativity motivates further exploration.
2. **Encourage interaction and collaboration:** Encourage students to share ideas and experiences with the group, as peer interaction enriches their learning.
3. **Be open to different interpretations:** Recognize that each student may understand or interpret “artistic expression” differently. Accepting these differences openly fosters creativity and individuality.



7. METHODS OF ARTS EDUCATION LABORATORIES

Method 1

Psychosocial support

Facilitator: Drago Švajger, psychotherapist

Keywords: self-regulation, relationship, communication, empathy, mental health, art, creative process, safety, development, self-image, self-confidence

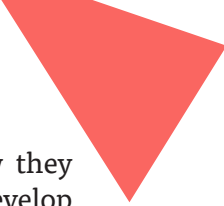
- Recommended for ages: 6–19
- Time spent: 4 hours
- Number of participants: 6–30



About the Method

This method is a structured reflective activity designed to create a safe, accepting, and connected learning environment. It is based on the values of acceptance, safety, equality and mutual respect. Its purpose is to support the development of self-awareness, a positive self-image and the skills of listening and respectful communication. In educational settings, the self-regulation of the adult plays a particularly important role. Children and adolescents are deeply shaped by the quality of the relationships they experience with adults. The way an adult enters into contact and builds a relationship gradually becomes part of the young person's inner world.

Self-regulation is a fundamental psychological capacity that enables an individual to recognise, understand and manage their emotions, thoughts and behavioural responses. How adults



manage their own inner states strongly influences how they relate to themselves and others. Young people do not develop self-regulation independently; they first experience it through the process of co-regulation with an adult who is emotionally present, attuned and internally stable. An important element of the approach is the use of artistic expression, which offers a playful, relaxed and non-intrusive way of connecting with students.

Advantages of the Method

Self-regulation enables individuals to cope more effectively with stress, reduce internal tension and maintain balance between psychological and physical well-being. The method supports emotional stability, empathy and the ability to set healthy boundaries. It helps individuals tune into others, listen without defensive reactions and express their needs clearly and respectfully.

The main strengths of this method lie in its simplicity, adaptability to different ages and group dynamics, and its immediate positive impact on relationships. The use of artistic activities helps students recognise, awaken and calm internal sensations and provides support in emotional and cognitive regulation. Students tend to understand more easily, open up more readily and collaborate more willingly.

Core Method Values

The method is rooted in acceptance, safety, equality and mutual respect. Key values include self-acceptance, responsibility, respect and nonviolent communication. At its centre is the relational space – an atmosphere in which individuals feel heard, accepted and safe. Such an environment fosters empathy, supports the understanding of different perspectives and strength-

ens the sense of belonging. Artistic experiences enable expression, exploration and contact with one's inner world, creating a supportive and secure context for personal development.

Goals

The goals include strengthening the sense of belonging and creating a supportive social climate that enables students to learn about one another and recognise similarities within the group. The method aims to develop self-awareness, self-esteem, communication and cooperation, as well as the ability to identify emotions, understand triggers and reduce impulsive reactions. It promotes thoughtful decision-making, socially appropriate behaviour, empathy, the ability to recognise emotions in oneself and others and social-emotional competencies.

Before the Laboratory

Define the framework of the laboratory

Select activities based on the age, session goals and the characteristics of the group. The plan should remain flexible enough so that it can get adjusted during the process, depending on the group's dynamics and participants' responses.

Space

A classroom or a multipurpose room that allows for a circular seating arrangement. The space should offer enough room for movement and support the creation of a safe atmosphere.

Equipment and materials

Paper, pens, a traffic-light poster and coloured traffic-light cards, cards with written emotions or symbols, a whiteboard or poster if needed.

Planning

Adapt questions to the age group and the goals of the gathering. Prepare examples of everyday school situations. Prepare a list of emotions and think about possible reflection prompts.

Description of the Method

1. Exercise: BUILDING SAFETY AND BELONGING

In this exercise, participants develop self-awareness, a positive self-image and skills in listening and respectful communication through guided self-introductions. It helps create a positive group atmosphere quickly, strengthens the sense of belonging and improves communication. It works well as an introductory activity or as a recurring exercise throughout the year. Best results come from repeating it or combining it with other social-emotional activities.

Goals

The goals are to strengthen the sense of belonging, explore the personal characteristics of participants, recognize similarities among group members, and create a supportive social environment that encourages collaboration, openness, and psychological safety.

Procedure



Duration: 20–45 minutes

Space: classroom or multipurpose space with circular seating available

Equipment and materials: paper, pens

No special prior knowledge is required for this exercise. It is recommended that the facilitator consider the group dynamics and choose the presentation format (circle, pairs or small groups). Participants may be informed in advance that they will be talking about themselves, but only to the extent they feel comfortable.

- 1. Introduction and purpose:** the facilitator explains the purpose of the exercise – getting to know each other, building trust and creating a safe space. They briefly outline the rules of communication: listen without interrupting, show respect, avoid mocking and allow participants to skip any question. This establishes a framework of psychological safety and sets clear expectations.
- 2. Individual reflection:** each participant writes their name on a sheet of paper, a brief description of themselves, three traits or habits, a guiding value, and something that makes them laugh. The facilitator encourages honesty but emphasizes that participants should share only what they feel comfortable revealing. Quiet time during writing allows for reflection and focus.
- 3. Presentations:** participants present their notes in a circle, in pairs or in small groups. The facilitator observes group dynamics, encourages eye contact and active listening, and asks supportive questions if needed. The goal is for every participant to feel heard and accepted.

4. **Identifying commonalities:** the group looks for commonalities in the presentations, such as shared interests, values or habits. The facilitator records these on a board or a poster. This step emphasizes connection, reduces feelings of isolation and reinforces the awareness that group members have more in common than they might have expected.
5. **Closing highlights:** the facilitator summarizes observations, praises participation, and emphasizes the importance of diversity and respect. Notes can optionally be displayed in the room as a symbol of community. The activity concludes with a brief reflection circle or by asking participants to share one word that describes their experience.

After the Exercise

The facilitator invites participants to reflect on how they felt, what they learned about others, and what surprised them. Feedback can be collected verbally, on sticky notes, or through a short questionnaire. It is important to check whether participants feel safe, accepted and ready for further engagement.

Tips & Additional Resources

- The possibility of presenting in pairs for more reserved groups
- Using drawings or symbols instead of writing
- Connecting the exercise with lessons on values, rules or relationships
- Extension: create a group poster titled “Who are we as a group?”

2. Exercise: EMOTION TRAFFIC LIGHT

The Emotion Traffic Light is a structured exercise designed to develop emotional awareness and regulate behavioural responses. It is based on the traffic light metaphor, providing children with a simple and concrete model for understanding internal processes. The method's strengths are its clarity, visual approach and immediate applicability in everyday situations. The values underpinning the method are self-acceptance, responsibility, respect and nonviolent communication. The exercise offers participants a practical tool for understanding and regulating emotions. With regular use, it strengthens self-control, improves social interactions and reduces conflict-prone reactions. It is suitable for classroom use, counselling or preventive programmes.

Goals

The goals include recognizing emotions, understanding triggers, reducing impulsive reactions and developing thoughtful decision-making and socially appropriate behaviour.

Procedure

Duration: 30–45 minutes

Space: classroom or multipurpose room with a circular seating arrangement

Equipment and materials: traffic light poster or colored traffic light cards, sheets of paper, pens



Participants are briefly introduced to the traffic light concept as a tool for understanding emotions. The aim is to create a safe

environment where feelings can be openly discussed. Respectful communication rules are encouraged. It is emphasized that all emotions are valid, important, and meaningful – there are no wrong or undesirable emotions.

Pre-exercise activity for the participants:

Participants are invited to think about a typical everyday situation that triggers different emotions (e.g., joy, surprise, embarrassment). The goal is not to delve into personal or intense experiences, but to gently direct attention toward recognizing emotions in daily life. The activity progresses gradually, playfully, and in a safe environment, encouraging participation without emotional pressure or exposure.

- 1. Introduction (explaining the metaphor):** the facilitator presents the traffic light as a model for responding: red means “stop,” yellow means “think,” and green means “choose action.” Participants give examples of emotions corresponding to each color.
- 2. Recognising emotions:** participants describe situations that trigger strong emotions and collectively determine which traffic light colour best represents the said emotions and why.
- 3. Reflection and strategies:** the group develops possible responses during the “yellow” phase. The facilitator introduces techniques such as breathing, counting, stepping back, or talking.
- 4. Decision-making exercise:** participants role-play situations in pairs or groups, practicing the transition from red to green with appropriate behaviour.

5. **Group reflection:** discussion on experiences, new insights and potential applications in daily life. Illustrations of the traffic light or coloured cards can be added if needed.

After the Exercise

A reflection circle is conducted where participants share what they learned and when they plan to apply the method. Feedback can be collected verbally or via a short anonymous questionnaire regarding clarity, usefulness and comfort during the activity.

Tips & Additional Resources

We can adapt the method to the age of participants:

- **younger participants:** drawing emotions
- **older participants:** analysing the real-life situations

Works well in combination with mindfulness exercises or social skills activities. Collaboration with teachers is recommended so the model can also be applied in classroom situations.



3. Exercise: EMOTIONAL DETECTIVE

The exercise is based on pantomime, where students use posture, facial expressions and movement to recognize emotions, moods and signs of emotional distress. It develops empathy, the ability to identify emotions in themselves and others, encourages reflection on behavior and strengthens social-emotional competencies. Students learn to interpret nonverbal cues, expand their emotional vocabulary, and practice self-regulation strategies – all within a safe and creative space without direct exposure. The activity fosters discussions about emotions, behavior, and relationships, allowing learning through experience and play. It provides a secure environment for exploring emotions, including uncomfortable ones, without personal exposure; it enhances empathy, emotional recognition and regulation, and promotes interpersonal dialogue and understanding.

Goals

Recognizing emotions and moods in oneself and others, and understanding the connection between emotions, behaviour, and mood, enables the development of social-emotional skills and empathy, while strengthening a safe and connected classroom environment.

Procedure

Duration: 20–30 minutes

Space: classroom or a room with enough space for movement

Equipment and materials: prepare cards with different emotions or symbols and consider possible reflective questions. Optionally, add illustrations or emotion symbols to a poster or board for visual support.



Pre-exercise activity for participants and guidance: participants are not exposed to emotions in advance; only the purpose of the activity and safe participation are explained.

1. **The facilitator explains the purpose of the activity and the rules:** participation is voluntary, and classmates' respect is required.
2. Each participant draws a card with an emotion and acts it out using facial expressions, posture and movements, without words.
3. Other participants guess the emotion.
4. **After the emotion is identified, the facilitator leads a discussion:** how did they recognize the emotion, which cues helped, how might the person behave and what support might they need from others.
5. **The facilitator encourages reflection:** noticing similarities among participants, the importance of understanding emotions and self-regulation strategies.

After the Exercise

Participants reflect on what they noticed and what they learned. The facilitator collects feedback on how they experienced the activity, which parts were more challenging, what they found helpful and any suggestions for improvement.

Tips & Additional Resources

Adaptations: work in pairs or small groups; use visual symbols or drawings; add reflection or self-regulation components.

- **Possible partners:** school counsellors, psychologists, social educators
- **Further literature:** literature on social-emotional learning, empathy, and body language communication



Method 2

Creative movement and body

Facilitator: Ana Romih, movement educator

Keywords: art, creative movement, collaboration, communication, relationships, expression, body awareness, creativity, social interaction, personal development, supportive environment

- **Recommended for ages:** 8–18
- **Time spent:** 4 hours
- **Number of participants:** max. 20–25 per group or per class



About the Method

Creative Movement represents an innovative approach that provides children and adolescents with opportunities to express, explore and process internal experiences through movement. It focuses on individual expression and intuitive movement, meaning there are no strict rules. Students can convey their emotions and thoughts in multiple ways, fostering creativity and freedom of expression.

Advantages of the Method

Creative Movement allows students to release tension and stress, contributing to greater attention and focus on movement activities. It actively engages the body, promoting kinesthetic learning and physical awareness, while the method remains flexible to meet the needs of the group. This enables

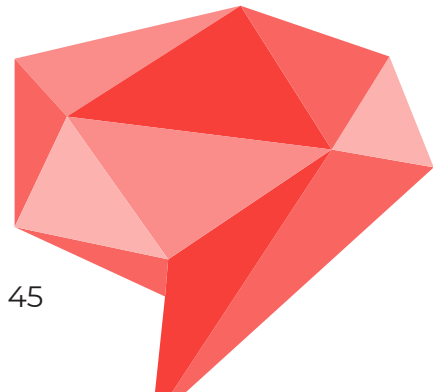
each participant to express themselves according to their abilities. Students can explore topics that interest them and feel personally relevant, increasing motivation and engagement. Through free movement in a supportive group, they can better cope with fears and uncertainty and discover different ways to express their emotions and thoughts, enriching their communication. Creative Movement also encourages interaction and strengthens relationships among students.

Core Method Values

Creative Movement is based on playfulness, allowing free exploration without fear of mistakes, while promoting teamwork and mutual support. Participants learn to respect the uniqueness of others and appreciate diverse forms of expression, while the method encourages creative thinking and innovative approaches. Students connect with their senses and bodily awareness, and the safe, supportive environment enables them to express themselves freely and learn without fear.

Goals

The aim is to include all participants, to strengthen group dynamics and to encourage active participation and individual expression.



Before the Laboratory

Define the framework of the laboratory

Select activities based on the age, session goals and the characteristics of the group. The plan should remain flexible enough so that it can get adjusted during the process, depending on the group's dynamics and participants' responses.

Space

Teachers should move aside desks and chairs to create a spacious, safe area for movement. The classroom should be arranged to foster a comfortable and encouraging atmosphere.

Equipment and materials

Basic materials are needed to conduct the workshop, such as paper, markers for drawing, and a speaker for music.

Planning

It is important to prepare alternative versions of the exercises to allow adaptation of the laboratory session according to the group's mood and the specific needs of the participants.



Description of the Method

1. Exercise: NAME + MOVEMENT

The exercise enables holistic participant engagement by combining body, movement, and speech. A key advantage is the rapid release of tension and reduction of stage fright, as the focus shifts from purely verbal introduction to playful physical expression. This fosters body awareness and encourages diverse forms of communication.

Goals

Getting to know names in a fun way, strengthening group cohesion (as everyone copies an individual's movement), encouraging observation, and activating the group at the start of a session. The exercise fosters a sense of belonging, as the group symbolically “welcomes” each participant into the circle through imitation.

Procedure

Duration: 10–15 minutes

Space: move aside desks and chairs to create a spacious, safe area for movement



1. **Forming the circle:** participants stand in a circle so that everyone can see each other. The facilitator explains the instructions: each person will say their name while performing a chosen movement (e.g., a jump, a hand wave, a spin).
2. **Individual introduction:** the first person steps slightly into the centre, says their name out loud and performs their chosen movement.
3. **Group response:** immediately afterward, the entire group repeats that person's name in unison while mimicking their movement as accurately as possible.
4. **Continuation:** the exercise proceeds clockwise until every participant has had a turn.

After the Exercise

Hold a brief discussion about how participants felt while being “in the spotlight” and when the group repeated their movement. Ask: Is it easier to remember names when they are paired with a movement?

Tips & Additional Resources

The workshop facilitator should start with the most “unusual” or energetic movement. This helps break the ice and shows that playful expression is welcome. If the group is very shy, agree that initial movements can be smaller (e.g., just using the hands) and gradually increase in size. To make the activity more challenging, try repeating all movements and names from the first to the last participant without pausing.

2. Exercise: TOUCH

The exercise encourages body awareness and the development of spatial orientation. By following the instructions, participants learn to respond quickly while using touch to enhance their sensory experience and strengthen their sense of being “here and now.” The activity helps break physical barriers in the space and promotes exploring the environment in a new, creative way.

Goals

Developing coordination and motor skills, exploring the environment, strengthening focus on the facilitator, and establishing a sense of safe connection (with oneself, the space, and others). Because of its open structure, the exercise serves as an excellent transition into more demanding improvisational or movement-based tasks, as it helps “ground” participants and prepare them for group collaboration.

Procedure

Duration: 10–20 minutes

Space: move aside desks and chairs to create a spacious, safe area for movement

Equipment and materials: music player and speaker (optional)



1. **Relaxed movement:** participants begin moving freely around the space. The facilitator encourages them to occupy all the empty corners of the room.
2. **Touch instructions:** facilitator starts giving simple prompts, such as “touch the floor,” “touch the wall,” or “touch something blue.” Participants respond as quickly as possible.
3. **Body and sensory challenges:** the instructions become more specific: “touch with your elbow,” “touch something soft,” “touch something cold.” This activates awareness of body parts and different textures.
4. **Progression and connection:** the exercise can be expanded by introducing rhythm or prompts that include others (e.g., “connect elbows in groups of three”).

After the Exercise

Reflection: How did your sense of space change? Which textures felt pleasant to you? Did you feel safe when touching objects or other people? Include a discussion about the importance of physical boundaries and respecting personal space.

Tips & Additional Resources

Adjust the pace of the instructions to the group’s energy – faster to raise energy, slower to calm the group down. When working with young participants, it is essential to emphasize that all touch must be voluntary and respectful. If you notice discomfort, limit the activity to touching inanimate objects or one’s own body. You can make the exercise more engaging by adding music: when the music stops, a touch instruction follows.

3. Exercise: I SEE, I HEAR, I FEEL

The exercise encourages deep sensory awareness and develops the ability to observe without immediate judgment. Moving between perception, visual expression, and movement creates a holistic experience that connects inner feelings with outward expression. It helps calm the group, enhances concentration, and trains participants to remain present in the “here and now.”

Goals

Developing attention to environmental details, heightening awareness of bodily sensations, encouraging symbolic thinking (transforming a sound or feeling into an image or movement), and strengthening physical expression through both static and dynamic forms. The method functions as an effective bridge between introspection and group dynamics.

Procedure

Duration: 25–30 minutes

Space: move aside desks and chairs to create a spacious, safe area for movement

Equipment and materials: paper, markers

1. **I see:** participants spend 2 minutes quietly observing the space (colours, light, details). This is followed by 2 minutes of drawing what they saw (either figuratively or abstractly).



2. **I hear:** participants spend 2 minutes with eyes closed, listening to sounds in the room and outside. This is followed by 2 minutes of drawing the sounds they heard (lines, rhythms, shapes).
3. **I feel:** participants spend 2 minutes focusing on bodily sensations (touch of the floor, breathing, warmth). This is followed by 2 minutes of drawing these internal perceptions.
4. **Translation into movement:** each participant chooses one of their drawings and translates it into the body – creating a pose (static form) or slow movement that reflects that perception.

After the Exercise

Which sense was easiest to translate onto paper? How did your awareness of your body change during the “I feel” phase? What was it like to transform your drawing into a movement or pose? Discuss how different people perceive the same environment in completely different ways.

Tips & Additional Resources

During the observation phases, ensure complete silence so participants can fully focus. Music is not recommended for this exercise, as it can interfere with the “I hear” phase. If participants feel uncertain while drawing, emphasize that this is not about creating art but about recording observations – a drawing can be just a line or a blot representing a sound or feeling. The exercise can be concluded by having everyone simultaneously show their “poses” and form a collective group sculpture.

Method 3

Improvisational Theatre

Facilitator: Veronika Hana Grubič,
theatre educator

Keywords: art, theatre improvisation, mental health, collaboration, communication, connection, learning to form relationships, positive attitude towards mistakes

- **Recommended for ages:** 8–19 years
- **Time spent:** 4 hours
- **Number of participants:** 8–32



About the Method

Theatrical improvisation is an experiential pedagogical method based on spontaneously creating situations and dialogues without a pre-written script. In educational settings, it is used as a tool to connect the group, enhance classroom dynamics, and create a relaxed atmosphere. The method relies on active participation, where students explore different ways of expressing themselves, listening and responding within the group through structured exercises and games. The focus is on process and collaboration rather than correctness or perfect execution. Participants co-create ideas, build on them and respond openly and supportively. This approach fosters communication, collaboration, and connection, while providing opportunities to learn how to form relationships within a group. A key element of the method is a positive attitude toward mistakes: errors are understood as a natural part of creation and learning, often serving as a starting

point for further idea development. This reduces fear of failure and encourages creative thinking and readiness to participate. The pedagogical use of theatrical improvisation originates from improvisational theatre practices developed in North America during the second half of the 20th century. Influential figures include Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone. The method emphasizes learning through play, spontaneity, and experiential exploration, promoting creativity, collaboration, and communication.

Advantages of the Method

Learning engages the whole body, which encourages connection, collaboration and communication. The method creates a relaxed atmosphere and promotes playfulness, while maintaining focus on the process. Participants develop multiple ways of expressing themselves and communicating and learn to overcome stage fright or resistance. The method is adaptable to the needs of the group and allows exploration of topics relevant to young people.

Core Method Values

Playfulness has an important pedagogical role, since it reduces fear of mistakes and encourages trying different ways of communicating and collaborating. A positive attitude toward mistakes recognizes errors as a natural and valuable part of the learning process, fostering creative thinking and cooperation. Collaboration and a sense of community promote belonging, connection and trust within the group. Active participation ensures that every individual engages and contributes to the collective process. Empathy and listening develop through responding to others and understanding different perspectives. A safe learning environment allows participants to express ideas, collaborate, and connect without fear of mistakes.

Goals

The method aims to engage the entire group in collaboration, strengthen connections between teachers and students and foster active participation in a safe, open, and supportive learning environment. Participants freely express their ideas, engage with the group and implement creative concepts.

Before the Laboratory

Define the framework of the laboratory

Select activities based on the age, session goals and the characteristics of the group. The plan should remain flexible enough so that it can get adjusted during the process, depending on the group's dynamics and participants' responses.

Space

Classroom or multipurpose space where tables can be moved aside and chairs arranged in a circle. The space should allow for movement and clear visibility of all participants, which is important for conducting improv exercises.

Equipment and materials

The exercises generally do not require any special equipment.

Planning

Based on the theme goals and information about the group, a plan for each workshop should be prepared. It is important to also develop alternative versions of the exercises to allow adjustments during the session, depending on participants' mood and specific needs.

Description of the Method

1. Introductory exercise: PASSING THE NAMES

The introductory exercise focuses on connection, collaboration and active participation from all group members. Through a name game, participants develop attention, listening skills and quick response ability, while gradually creating a safe and relaxed atmosphere.

The exercise encourages viewing mistakes as a natural part of the process, reducing fear of exposure and strengthening readiness to participate. Emphasis is on group dynamics, where individual responses are not judged as “wrong” but are seen as part of shared learning and co-creation.

Goals

The goals of the exercise include learning participants’ names, strengthening the cohesion of the group and developing the ability to actively listen and respond within the group. The participants develop attention, spatial awareness within the group and their reaction speed, while also fostering the acceptance of mistakes and a sense of safety.

Procedure

Duration: 10–15 minutes

Space: classroom or multipurpose room with circular arrangement, without tables

Equipment and materials: none



Participants stand in a circle, so that everyone can see each other.

1. **Introduction and Explanation:** facilitator presents the purpose of the exercise: learning names, connection, and collaboration. They emphasize that mistakes are part of the game and are welcome.
2. **Basic procedure:** one person starts by clapping toward another participant while saying their own name. The selected person continues by clapping and sending their name to the next.
3. **Establishing rhythm:** once participants understand the rules, gradually increase the pace. Encourage maintaining rhythm and attention.
4. **Advance stage:** in the next step participants clap while saying the name of the person they are sending the signal to. This strengthens attention to others and group cooperation.
5. **Handling mistakes:** if a mistake occurs (wrong name, delay, or broken rhythm), the participant takes a short walk around the circle before returning. The group can respond with a positive signal (e.g., cheer or applause) to reinforce a relaxed attitude toward mistakes.
6. **Possible variations:**
 - dividing the group into two circles, where participants can switch between the circles upon making a mistake
 - adding movement (e.g., step toward the centre)
 - incorporating walking to another person's spot

After the Exercise

Facilitator leads a brief discussion about the experience: how participants felt, how they experienced mistakes and how increasing speed affected attention. Emphasis is on recognizing mistakes as part of the shared learning process.

Tips & Additional Resources

- begin the exercise slowly and gradually increase pace
- it is important for the facilitator to actively encourage viewing mistakes as positive experiences
- for reserved groups, maintain a slower tempo or simpler version at first

The exercise is suitable as a group warm-up, as it quickly engages the participants and fosters connection.



2. Socio-Dynamic Exercise: FRUIT SALAD

This exercise emphasizes movement, responsiveness and active participation of all the members of the group. Using a simple structure, it encourages quick reactions, attention, and involvement, while also allowing observation of group dynamics, including inclusion, exclusion, and initiative.

The exercise enables a gradual implementation of various thematic categories (e.g., interests, habits, experiences) to support group understanding and awareness of similarities and differences between the participants.

Goals

The goals of the exercise include promoting active participation, developing responsiveness and attention, and strengthening collaboration and group cohesion. Participants build a sense of belonging while recognizing similarities and differences among themselves.

Procedure

Duration: 10–20 minutes

Space: classroom or multipurpose room with circular chair arrangement

Equipment and materials: one fewer chair than participants



Participants sit in a circle. One participant stands in the centre.

1. **Introduction and explanation:** facilitator presents the rules and emphasizes safe inclusion and cooperation of all the participants.
2. **Beginning:** the person in the centre states:
“Everyone who ... (e.g., likes chocolate, plays sports, has a pet at home) must switch seats.”
3. **Changing seats:** all the participants for whom the statement applies stand and find a new chair, avoiding their previous seat.
4. **New person in the centre:** the person left without a chair becomes the new centre participant and provides a new statement.
5. **Game development:** tempo can gradually increase and statements can vary from simple to more personal or thematic, depending on the session’s goals.

After the Exercise

Facilitator leads reflection: how participants felt, noticing similarities with others, and their reactions when left without a chair or responding quickly.

Discussion can also explore inclusion: who was frequently in the centre, whether everyone felt included, and how the group responded to different initiatives.

Tips & Additional Resources

- Start with simple and neutral statements, later you can connect them to the session theme (e.g., relationships, interests, school)
- It is important for the facilitator to monitor the group's dynamics to ensure statements remain inclusive and safe
- You can use the exercise as an introduction to a topic or to explore group's dynamics
- A version is also possible in which the statements are given by the facilitator, allowing greater control over the content

The activity can serve as a starting point for discussion about similarities, differences and belonging.



3. Mistake-Handling Exercise: ZOMBIES

This exercise emphasizes group attention, responsiveness, and mutual support. Participants develop observation skills, quick decision-making, and collaboration, while ensuring no individual is left unsupported.

The exercise also explores responses to pressure and mistakes. Participants must act quickly while maintaining connection with the group and helping others. The focus is on feeling of responsibility towards the group and strengthening of trust and cooperation.

Goals

The goals of the exercise include developing group attention, responsiveness and collaboration, as well as strengthening a sense of responsibility for other group members. Participants build the ability to make quick decisions, monitor what is happening within the group and be ready to assist others in high-pressure situations.

Procedure

Duration: 10–20 minutes

Space: classroom or multipurpose room with circular arrangement, without desks

Equipment and materials: none



Participants stand in a circle. One person starts in the middle as the “zombie.”

1. **Introduction and explanation:** facilitator presents the rules and emphasizes attention and mutual help. Participants are reminded to observe group activity and respond to others.
2. **Beginning:** “zombie” moves slowly and evenly toward a chosen participant, signalling whom they “attack” with eye contact.
3. **Seeking help:** the targeted participant must quickly establish eye contact with another participant and signal for help nonverbally.
4. **Rescue:** the chosen participant calls out a third person’s name. The zombie redirects toward this new person.
5. **Mistakes or Delays:** if someone fails to react in time or is reached by the zombie, they become the new zombie, and the game continues.

After the Exercise

Facilitator leads the reflection of participants’ experiences: how they observed, took initiative and helped each other. Discussion can also explore handling pressure and responding in fast-paced situations.

Special emphasis is on the question of collaboration: did the participants notice, who remained without help, how they responded to others and how they experienced the role of a »zombie«.

Tips & Additional Resources

- begin with slow, even zombie movement, adjusting pace to the group
- it is important for facilitator to encourage continuous observation of the “endangered” participant
- if the exercise is not running smoothly, you can temporarily introduce a rule allowing anyone to call out a name, then return to the original format
- the exercise can be advanced by adding more “zombies” once the group has mastered the basic dynamic

Emphasize that the goal is collaboration, not the exclusion of individuals.



4. Reflexion Exercise: SHARING CIRCLE

The Sharing Circle is a reflective activity designed to conclude the group process and raise awareness of experiences, feelings, and learning. It allows participants to express their thoughts, emotions and observations, while also hearing the perspectives of others.

The exercise encourages active listening, respectful communication and a sense of being heard. This strengthens a safe and supportive group environment and helps connect individual experiences to collective learning.

Goals

The goals of the exercise include reflecting on personal experiences, raising awareness of learning, and strengthening communication and mutual listening. Participants develop the ability to express their own thoughts and feelings while respectfully acknowledging the opinions of others.

Procedure

Duration: 10–20 minutes

Space: classroom or a multipurpose room with a circular seating arrangement

Equipment and materials: optional speaking object (e.g., small ball)



The participants sit in a circle.

1. **Introduction and rules:** facilitator explains the purpose of the reflection and the basic rules: only the person holding the object speaks, while others listen without interruption. Participants may choose not to share if they do not wish to.
2. **Sharing experiences:** participants share their experiences either in turn or voluntarily (e.g., what they found most interesting, what they learned, and how they felt).
3. **Leading reflection:** facilitator may ask supportive questions, such as:
 - What did you take away from today's activity?
 - What was challenging for you?
 - When did you feel most included?
 - What would you like to be different next time?
4. **Conclusion:** facilitator summarizes the key observations and emphasizes the importance of collaboration and the shared process.

After the Exercise

The exercise provides a calm conclusion to the activity and a transition from active participation to reflection. Participants become aware of their experiences, contributing to a better understanding of learning and group dynamics.

Tips & Additional Resources

- the reflection should be adapted to the participants' age: for younger children, keep it shorter and more concrete
- it is important to create a safe environment where sharing is voluntary
- this exercise can also be done using a single word or short phrase
- using a speaking object helps structure the conversation and encourages listening

Reflection should remain light yet meaningful – it is intended for understanding experiences, not for assessment.



8. PEER REVIEW: PAMELA ANDERSSON

School Laboratories in Trbovlje, Slovenia

- 1 March 2026, third visit to the school with the same group

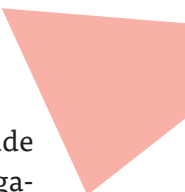
Introduction of the Reviewer

Pamela Andersson is a Development Coordinator at the Luckan Raseborg Children's Culture Center, Finland. She plans and curates programs for children and families, working with tasks such as fundraising and EU applications. She is currently leading the project Art Bubble and participating in Mind the Gap, involving art workshops for teenagers.

Description of the Laboratory

At the beginning of the day, the group was welcomed in a larger space all together, and small creative tasks were carried out as a larger group. After this, the class was divided into two smaller groups for structured activities and exercises. At the end, all students were brought together again for the final part of the laboratory day as a whole group. The day was concluded with reflections, followed by a discussion among the team, the teachers, and the school's social worker. The tasks emphasized activation, participation, and creating a safe space through group exercises facilitated by the team.

At the school laboratory in Trbovlje, together with staff from Pionirski dom – Center for Youth Culture in Ljubljana, I expe-



rienced a very warm atmosphere and a welcoming attitude among pupils, teachers, and staff. It was an active and engaging day for all parties present.

Some strengths and aspects that can also be transferred and utilized by other children's culture centers were, among other things, the methods of creating psychological safety. During the day, it became clear that the pupils responded positively to praise and to the activities carried out. Play and movement were used to create engagement and fun, even with some initial reluctance shown by a few students. The participants ended up supporting each other and showed initiative, and the combination of artistic practice, psychology, and pedagogy thus created a good approach. Working with the team provided many valuable insights.

The few reluctant pupils were drawn in to become part of the group through encouraging comments. Gamification methods also worked well. The art pedagogue gave the class a challenge, and they responded with great focus. Some pupils found the courage to take on a more central role; first the boys took to the stage, then the girls as well.

The sentence starters and movement exercises used are adaptable and would be beneficial in Finnish schools and more broadly in a European school context. The best thing to observe during the day was indeed the multidisciplinary collaboration between art pedagogues, teachers, the social worker, and the psychotherapist working toward a common goal – the well-being of the pupils.

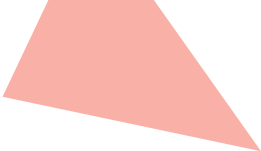
During the day, the program that was carried out had a tempo, but there was still a feeling of calm, presence, and reflection.

The session at the end, reserved for reflections together with the teachers, was an important moment to pause and further develop the dialogue between the Center for Youth Culture and the school. The close collaboration involving art pedagogues and teachers can, at its best, be a significant resource for increasing the well-being of teenagers, which also became clear during the day. Teachers also told us that the behavioral change was significant from the first to the third laboratory.

The team talked about how teenagers experience a period in their lives when they need to be seen, supported by adults, and guided toward finding their own strengths. Both school teachers and art teachers can really make a difference, and this can change a teenager's attitude or help youth find interests, develop self-knowledge, and reflect on their own qualities.

Including a psychotherapist in the multidisciplinary team clarified the roles, and each person was able to focus on their designated responsibilities. Holding the laboratory in the school also provided tools for the teachers, as well as practical examples of how to implement techniques and exercises into everyday school days and classes. It was also discussed during the day that, in order to deepen the collaboration further, the class could be invited for a visit to the Center for Youth Culture in the capital city.

There were many memorable and meaningful moments during the day. The pupils showed cooperation, helpfulness, and openness. Engagement increased through games, for example the task in which signals were sent to each other. Positive reinforcement created flow and engagement. Participants responded well to praise, leading to increased confidence and partici-



pation. Emphasizing the importance of the process over strict rules was an important aspect. Positive feedback and praise were crucial for building up the spirit of the participants. It became clear that playful group interactions fostered communication, the students' own initiative, and joy.

The strongest moment for me was when the small papers with written “sentence starters” were handed out to the pupils, and they could express their own thoughts at the end of the laboratory. Very bravely, they stood up and shared insights about the experience. I mostly observed the super talented art pedagogues in action. They engaged with the pupils, encouraging them to open up and shift their attitude from negative to positive, from passive to active, from timid to confident. Some children even took the initiative to be at the center of attention. I also noticed that the art pedagogues intervened in the process immediately if someone was not given space, and in this way the process used in the laboratory became a model for respectful communication. The presence of the art pedagogues was complete, and the pupils reacted positively, giving their attention and presence to the situation. The pedagogues also addressed situations clearly to clarify matters if they identified that someone needed extra support during the exercise.

Tools and Strategies for Identity Reinforcement

I found that the participants engaged well and showed great potential for cooperation. A student who doesn't perform well in traditional theoretical tasks at school can still excel in the arts. Any activity that allows identity reinforcement shapes

our confidence. I found it most interesting that the exercises allowed the pupils to support each other. One person would start to encourage another or bring others into the exercise as well, motivating those who were still a bit skeptical at the beginning. When the art pedagogues gave feedback, it resulted in increased activity among the pupils. As the game task continued, subtle smiles started to appear, followed by laughter and even giggles. The atmosphere of fun was palpable, even though a few of the pupils initially denied it or said they didn't enjoy or want to participate; in the end, everyone did. Reinforcing positive behavior and participation worked. I also recognized that attention and positive reinforcement supported cohesion in the group.

I believe this experience of having fun as a group will later impact schoolwork in a positive way. It already showed an improvement in group dynamics when coming together for the final session of the day. But will it be easy for the teachers to have the confidence to implement these methods later on? Some methods could be used regularly at the beginning or at the end of class. Teachers could also assign a facilitating role to the pupils or use the techniques to motivate another task. The teacher can take on the role of a participant, and the group can learn new things together without the need for authority, but rather by learning as a group and supporting each other. Research also implies that embodied learning is effective and that when artistic methods are used in a learning environment there is freedom to make mistakes and nothing negative happens. When I think of the laboratory day, I am drawn to these keywords: energy, shared experiences, strengthening cooperation, input and reflection, time and space, body and movement, improvisation, fun, and learning by doing.

Some areas for improvement or suggestions from Finnish practice could include implementing visual aids or reminder signs. Regarding the principles of safer space, in our center we



use the rules for safer space as a set of seven principles that are hung on the wall in the workshop space at all times. The sign with the rules can also be brought to the school and used to briefly review the rules of mutual respect at the beginning of a workshop or laboratory so that everyone remembers the basic rules of conduct. This can also feel supportive for teachers.

Another approach that could be used is calming techniques such as dimming the lights, using blankets, or guided imagery to help students reset mentally before activities. Students tell us they do not tend to get enough sleep and do not always know how to relax. Perhaps some of them need clearer instructions or boundaries. If students say they feel tired or overstimulated, we take a moment at the beginning or end of the exercise to calm down. Using light and darkness can help redirect participants' focus. A few minutes of restful relaxation wrapped in a blanket can provide new energy for the following activity.

Insights

During the laboratory day in Trbovlje, the teenagers were seen, activated, given positive responses by the art pedagogues, and encouraged to participate in different group exercises. A safe space was built up to help the pupils feel at ease through discussion with a psychotherapist. Methods such as structured tasks, improvisation, and gamification were used in the exercises by the art pedagogues. The result was a shift in the energy of the classroom and opportunities for the students to take on new roles, experiment, and even create new rules. The main focus during the day was on group activities, inclusion, building trust, and facilitating cooperation. Some pupils found the courage to take on leading roles. All participants were included through the use of written sentence starters, allowing the teenagers to express their own points of view and

be heard. Last but not least, there was a beneficial session for reflection with the teachers and the school's social worker.

The techniques used brought embodied learning to the forefront, emphasizing fun, cooperation, and reflection. Teachers can incorporate these methods into daily routines, starting or ending classes with these exercises. Regular teacher gatherings would be recommended to share experiences and develop practice, and the emphasis should be on using praise instead of discipline, building trust, and creating a safe environment.

All in all, I was impressed by the children's spontaneous ingenuity when given freedom. I also give praise to the whole team for truly connecting with the kids, bringing undivided attention and strong presence. I was reminded of the importance of process, trust, and positive reinforcement in fostering creativity and confidence. My overall impression is that the approach demonstrated strong potential for greater cooperation, building confidence, and promoting well-being in schools. Positive feedback and a focus on process are key to successful implementation.

