

The Impact of Art Therapy on Shyness and Social Skills in Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The school, as a formal education system, plays a decisive role in the socialization of children. The purpose of this research was to investigate the impact of art therapy on shyness and social skills among male students in the city of Khormooj.

Methods and Materials: This applied research, in terms of purpose, utilized an experimental design employing a pre-test post-test with a control group. The research population included all male students of Khormooj city in the academic year 2022-2023, from which 30 students were randomly selected and assigned to two groups: experimental (15 students) and control (15 students). The experimental group received an art therapy training program over eight sessions, while the control group was on a waitlist. The research instruments were the Gresham and Elliott (1990) Social Skills Questionnaire and the Samooei (2003) Shyness Questionnaire. The data from the pre-test and post-test stages were analyzed using multivariate analysis of covariance and SPSS software version 22.

Findings: The results showed that art therapy significantly affects the shyness of students in Khormooj; it also significantly affects their social skills. All research findings were significant at the $\alpha=0.05$ level.

Conclusion: Students with communication problems experience numerous interpersonal issues while interacting with peers in the school environment and during play, leading to the emergence of negative behaviors such as shyness; therefore, it can be concluded from the research findings that art therapy is effective in improving social skills and reducing shyness in students.

Keywords: Art Therapy, Shyness, Social Skills

1. Introduction

Aultivating children's social skills is of particular importance, as acquiring social skills can enhance their friendly relationships, including improving the child-parent relationship (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022). Social skills are the ability to establish interpersonal relationships with

others in a way that is acceptable, valuable, and norm-compliant to society while being beneficial to the individual, family, and society and yielding mutual benefits. One of the signs of mental and social health is the presence of these social relationships (Abbasi et al., 2020).

Shyness is a phenomenon visible in individuals across societies, where a significant portion of children,

adolescents, and adults, despite their unwillingness, involuntarily confine themselves within a barrier of shyness, thereby unable to flourish their talents and take advantage of their valuable capacities and abilities (Birang & Alivandi Vafa, 2021). Shyness entails excessive worry about self-presentation in social situations. Individuals strive to control their self-images and identity-related information in social contexts. Sometimes, shyness may interfere with a child's or adolescent's optimal social development and limit their learning. On the other hand, communicative inhibition or shyness affects an individual's communication style with their surroundings. This type of inhibition can be observed to varying degrees in a child's behavior (Shahri et al., 2014). Shyness can be defined as a discomfort or inhibition in interpersonal or social situations that prevents an individual from pursuing their academic and social goals. Shyness leads to excessive self-focus, worry, and recurring mental preoccupation along with thoughts and feelings or physical reactions, increasing heart rate, etc. (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022; Shahri et al., 2014). Shyness involves excessive worry about self-presentation in social situations. The theory of self-presentation is based on the assumption that individuals strive to control their self-images and identity-related information in social situations. Shyness, social withdrawal, and reticence refer to individuals' quietness and silence in engaging in social interactions. On one hand, shyness is a common and under-recognized emotional condition. Every individual experiences doubt, hesitation, or shyness in new social situations. Despite this, sometimes shyness may interfere with a child's or adolescent's optimal social development and limit their learning (Birang & Alivandi Vafa, 2021). Shyness is a significant and universal feeling that may become widespread and used by individuals as a coping mechanism for dealing with new social stimuli. Shyness may go unnoticed due to reduced eye and physical contact and reserved and quiet behavior. The speech of a shy person is often soft, gentle, accompanied by trembling and hesitation (Hassanpour et al., 2022; Wood et al., 2003).

Zimbardo and Iqbal (2009) define shyness as an excessive self-focus, preoccupation with one's thoughts, feelings, and physical reactions that can range from mild social discomfort to severe, inhibiting social fear. Shyness is an abnormal and anxious attention to oneself in a social situation, resulting in psychological-muscular tension, affecting emotional and cognitive conditions, and leading to raw, unmeasured behaviors and inappropriate reactions. In other words, the phenomenon of shyness relates to a personal, socially distressing problem that appears as a

disability or impairment. Shyness is like a mental experience accompanied by fear, anxiety, anger, and interpersonal confrontations. Although shy individuals are very cautious in speaking and acting, they actually endure a lot of distress and confusion. They have an excessive focus on themselves and are constantly preoccupied with their thoughts and reactions (Moosa et al., 2011; Shahri et al., 2014; Wood et al., 2003). One of the most important diagnostic signs of shyness is having mental anxiety and avoiding social behaviors. Shyness is a social phenomenon that occurs in social situations and is accompanied by simultaneous experiences of anger, avoidance, hesitation, confusion, and awkward behavior (Hassanpour et al., 2022). In simple terms, shyness means excessive self-attention and fear of facing others, as shyness is a form of social fear or anxiety where the individual is reluctant to face unfamiliar people and social interactions. In every society, a significant percentage of children and adolescents face this behavioral disorder and inhibiting factor of social personality development, preventing the blossoming of capabilities, creativity, and responsibility fulfillment (Abbasi et al., 2020; Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022). Practically, shy children and adolescents practice and experience social skills less and their friendships develop less. They tend to avoid sports activities, performing arts, and discussions that might make them the center of attention. They are also perceived as unfriendly, tend towards feelings of loneliness, have low self-esteem, and experience above-average gastrointestinal (stomach and intestinal) problems. Shy children are more prone to anxiety in adolescence. Shy adults tend to be less present in social networks and feel less satisfied with the support from social networks compared to others. Many students never progress because they are afraid to speak in class (Wood et al., 2003). Students who are shy blame themselves more, like themselves less, are less intimate with themselves, and are more passive compared to their non-shy peers. Such factors negatively impact others' perceptions. Shy individuals are often perceived as less intimate and likable by their peers and, for all these reasons, may be rejected by their peers and have little chance of developing their social skills (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022; Shahri et al., 2014).

Social skills are all the behaviors that help us truly connect with our emotions and needs and achieve interpersonal goals (García, 2020; Rajabi & Alimoradi, 2018). Hargie (1986), in defining social skills, refers to six components: firstly, social behaviors are goal-oriented, and we use them to achieve desirability. The second feature of

skilled social skills is the interrelatedness of these abilities, meaning that in addition to having a goal, we use them simultaneously. The third feature is the appropriateness of social skills to the situation. The fourth is that social skills are distinct behavioral units. As Argyle believes, social responses have three levels and consist of larger (interview) and smaller units (looking during an interview). The fifth aspect is that social skills are learnable, and finally, the sixth aspect is that individuals have cognitive control over skills (Arefi Shelikh et al., 2022; García, 2020; Yadav & Iqbal, 2009). Social skills are a set of abilities that initiate and maintain beneficial positive social relationships, expand friendship and intimacy with peers, create satisfactory adjustment in school, allow individuals to adapt to circumstances, and accept social environment demands (Tong et al., 2021). Social skills often have both cognitive and emotional dimensions. The emotional dimension in social skills training involves various interconnected aspects. At the lowest and most basic level, recognizing and identifying the emotions of others is discussed, and the ultimate goal of such training is to provide appropriate and acceptable ways to express any feeling in any situation (García, 2020). In the emotional dimension, another important aspect that has been considered as one of the social skills in recent years is the empathy dimension, through which an individual can put themselves in someone else's place, be affected by their feelings, and be able to recognize and experience the emotions of others, whether sorrow or joy. Various studies show that offenders or criminals have not acquired the ability to empathize with others or understand it weakly (García, 2020; Rajabi & Alimoradi, 2018; Shahri et al., 2014; Shalani & Azadimanesh, 2016; Shalani et al., 2016; Tong et al., 2021; Yadav & Iqbal, 2009).

Art therapy is one of the most important branches of art therapy. Painting is the self-motivated drawing of images that provide opportunities for communication and non-verbal expression. Art therapy is not about painting cultivation or painting instruction; rather, it offers opportunities for individuals to freely express their feelings, emotions, needs, and even knowledge through colors and lines (Ghadampour et al., 2019; Gozashti et al., 2017; Nazri et al., 2022). Painting and, in general, visual arts are used as tools for projection, emotional discharge, presentation of thoughts, and demonstration of feelings, conflicts, and inner desires. In fact, with tools like painting, a child experiences all aspects of their life, tests themselves, and builds their identity (Ghadampour et al., 2019). Children's anxiety symptoms appear in metaphorical manifestations such as

playing, painting, and storytelling. Since children have a limited vocabulary compared to adults for expressing their emotional experiences, painting can serve as a language for the outpouring of emotions such as aggression. In children's paintings, a part of themselves is revealed to us, showing how they think, feel, and see. Thus, art therapy offers opportunities for individuals to freely express their feelings, emotions, needs, and even knowledge through colors and lines (Arefi Shelikh et al., 2022; Birang & Alivandi Vafa, 2021; Rajabi & Alimoradi, 2018; Shalani & Azadimanesh, 2016; Shalani et al., 2016; Tong et al., 2021). Given that social skills are not innate and are socially created by individuals or society and defined as social problems, they must also be solved in society. Accordingly, the use of indirect, group-based, and empathetic methods, such as painting, playing, storytelling, or poetry, in skill training is considered a necessity and various methods have been used for skill training, one of the most important being art therapy (Arefi Shelikh et al., 2022; Birang & Alivandi Vafa, 2021; Ghadampour et al., 2019). Painting is the self-motivated drawing of images that provide opportunities for communication and non-verbal expression (Shahri et al., 2014). One aspect of drawing is play and entertainment, and the other is mental development and the advancement of abilities. Children show their inner emotions in their images, which are inaccessible to us. By encouraging and validating children's artwork, we can boost their confidence and inspire them for future experiences. The joy of drawing images and creating something means being useful, constructive, capable, and innovative to a child and has a significant impact on their mind. Considering this perspective, children's drawing has an educational rather than instructional aspect (Rahna & Nithya, 2022; Shalani et al., 2016). Despite scattered research proving the effectiveness of this method as a psychological intervention, no study was found examining its impact on shyness and social skills. Given the issues raised, the researcher sought to answer whether art therapy affects shyness and social skills in primary school students in Khormooj.

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study was applied in purpose and experimental in approach, conducted in a pre-test post-test design with a control group. The research population included all second-grade male primary school students in Khormooj during the academic year 2022-2023. A random selection was made

from one of the boys' primary schools. Then, through random sampling, 30 second-grade students were selected and divided into experimental and control groups, with 15 students in each group. Initially, a pre-test was administered to both groups. Subsequently, the experimental group underwent an art therapy program, and the control group did not receive any intervention. For the intervention, the students' art teacher was asked to allow the second-grade students from the selected class in the experimental group to draw their desired paintings on given topics using any art materials such as colored pencils, pastels, and watercolors during the weekly art class. Meanwhile, the control group students in the same class did not receive this intervention and continued with their regular class schedule. At the end, a post-test was administered to the experimental group.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Social Skills

The Social Skills Rating System by Gresham and Elliott (1990) consists of 48 questions in two sections: social skills (30 questions) and behavioral problems (18 questions), with the social skills section having three subscales: cooperation, assertion, and self-control. In this study, only the social skills section was used. The questionnaire items are rated on a Likert scale (never: score 0, sometimes: score 1, often: score 2). The total score of these subscales yields the social skills score. Shahim (2002) validated the social skills questionnaire among mentally retarded children in Iran. The reliability of this scale in his study was estimated to be 0.87 for social skills, 0.76 for cooperation, 0.72 for assertiveness, and 0.68 for self-control (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022; Rajabi & Alimoradi, 2018). In this research, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was found to be 0.81, which is within the acceptable range.

2.2.2. Shyness

The shyness questionnaire framework was developed by Samoei (2003). The initial form had 52 questions and a 5-

option answer sheet (never, rarely, sometimes, most of the time, always). In this study, a shortened version with 20 questions was used. In the study by Emadian and Firoozzadeh (2016), it is stated that the shyness questionnaire possesses suitable psychometric quality (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022). In this research, the questionnaire's reliability through Cronbach's alpha was found to be 0.74.

2.3. Intervention

2.3.1. Art Therapy Training

The training program was derived from Nezadi Kashani et al. (2009), where the experimental group participated in 8 consecutive sessions (each session lasting 45 to 60 minutes) according to the following instructions:

Session 1: Drawing various emotions (laughter, crying, etc.)

Session 2: Drawing group members

Session 3: What makes me upset?

Session 4: Draw an animal you would like to be.

Session 5: Group mural painting (on a topic of the children's choice)

Session 6: What is the weather like when it rains?

Session 7: Drawing of the body.

Session 8: Drawing with music (music with fast and slow rhythms and a topic of the children's choice)

2.4. Data analysis

To test hypotheses and determine the intervention's effect on the experimental group and evaluate the score differences between the two groups from pre-test to post-test, multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) and a significance level of 0.05 using SPSS software version 22 were used.

3. Findings and Results

The Table 1 reports the descriptive statistics of the research variables at two stages, pre-test and post-test, for the control and experimental groups.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Research Variables

Group	Variable	Pre-test Mean	Pre-test SD	Post-test Mean	Post-test SD
Experimental (Art Therapy)	Social Skills	22.71	3.63	26.76	3.90
	Shyness	54.82	6.35	49.45	5.75
Control	Social Skills	21.99	3.45	22.10	3.53
	Shyness	55.10	5.42	55.24	5.66

Based on Table 1 results, it is evident that the shyness scores have intuitively decreased, and the social skills scores have increased after the intervention, while no significant change is observed in the control group scores. Since inferential data analysis of the research used analysis of covariance, a parametric test, the assumption of data normality was examined using the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The significance value of this test for all variables was greater than 0.05. Therefore, the assumption of data normality for variables in control and experimental groups was confirmed. To examine the assumption of the homogeneity of regression slopes, the interaction between the covariate and independent variable was analyzed using

the analysis of covariance test, and the results showed that the interaction was not significant [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=0.600$], [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=1.858$]. Hence, it can be concluded that the assumption of homogeneity of regression slopes is met. Furthermore, Levene's test results indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was also met [$P \geq 0.05$].

To compare the mean scores of shyness and social skills among primary school students in Khormooj in the post-test, the ANCOVA test was used, controlling the pre-test scores as a covariate before comparing the post-test scores. The results are presented below.

Table 2

ANCOVA Results for Comparing Mean Scores of Shyness Among Primary School Students in Khormooj

Variable	Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Eta Squared
Shyness	Pre-test	428.379	1	428.379	70.036	.000	.591
	Group	2675.062	1	2675.062	67.173	.000	.559
Social Skills	Pre-test	178.432	1	178.432	26.632	.000	.497
	Group	2723.475	1	2723.475	56.486	.000	.538

As seen in Table 2, the effect of pre-test scores on post-test scores is significant [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=70.036$]. It can be stated that the correlation between the covariate and independent variable is maintained. The F value for the group was reported to be significant at an error level of less than 0.05 [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=67.173$], meaning that after removing the pre-test effect, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed. This means that art therapy is effective on the shyness of primary school students in Khormooj. Eta squared was reported as 0.559, indicating the magnitude of this effect.

Additionally, the results showed that the effect of pre-test scores on post-test scores is significant [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=26.632$]. It can be stated that the correlation between the covariate and independent variable is maintained. The F value for the group was reported to be significant at an error level of less than 0.05 [$P\text{-Value} \leq 0.05$, $F=65.486$], meaning that after removing the pre-test effect, there is a significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups in the post-test. Therefore, the research hypothesis is confirmed. This means that art therapy is effective on the social skills of primary school students in Khormooj. Eta squared was reported as 0.538, indicating the magnitude of this effect.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study are in line with several studies (Arefi Shelkh et al., 2022; Birang & Alivandi Vafa, 2021; García, 2020; Ghadampour et al., 2019; Gozashti et al., 2017; Nazri et al., 2022; Nigmatullina & Gerasimenko, 2016; Rahna & Nithya, 2022; Rajabi & Alimoradi, 2018; Shahri et al., 2014; Shalani & Azadimanesh, 2016; Shalani et al., 2016; Tong et al., 2021), suggesting that art therapy can play a significant role in enhancing children's skills and reducing their shyness, thereby facilitating their psychological and social development.

Drawing, as an aspect of art therapy, serves not only as play and entertainment but also fosters mental development and skill advancement. Children express their inner emotions through their drawings, which are otherwise inaccessible to us. By encouraging and validating children's artwork, we can boost their confidence and inspire them to engage in further explorations. The joy derived from drawing and creating is meaningful, constructive, empowering, and innovative for a child and significantly impacts their mind (Ghadampour et al., 2019). Thus, through its influence on the mind and psyche, art therapy strengthens students' self-confidence and facilitates play and participation in social life, controlling the sensory

environment and reducing anxiety and shyness among students.

Furthermore, the results demonstrated that art therapy intervention effectively improves the social skills of primary school students in Khormooj. These findings are consistent with mentioned studies, which highlight the impact of painting and art therapy on enhancing social skills. In explaining the significance of this hypothesis, it should be noted that art therapy is a learnable skill that, through drawing, creates a sense of controlled being. Art therapy has an impact on treating or understanding the issues of children and adults, as the process of drawing or creating is a complex one in which the child uses various aspects of their experiences to construct a meaningful whole. In this process, they present more than just an image. They reveal a part of themselves to us, showing how they think, feel, and see. Hence, art therapy provides opportunities for individuals to freely express their feelings, emotions, needs, and even knowledge through colors and lines (Ghadampour et al., 2019; Shahri et al., 2014; Shalani et al., 2016). Art therapy promotes identity and personality growth and stimulates a sense of achievement in students through creative tools. During art therapy sessions, students can strengthen their relationships with each other and their environment, connect with their inner lives through artistic work, develop a deeper sense of empathy and cooperation, and ultimately achieve personal adjustment and improve social skills. It can be concluded that primary school students can express their emotions, feelings, and thoughts through projection in targeted art therapy sessions with specific topics and psychological principles, leading to adaptive behaviors (Shalani et al., 2016). Furthermore, art therapy, by affecting the minds and psyches of primary school students, strengthens their self-confidence and reduces shyness. Therefore, painting can be used as one of the art therapy methods to impact the psychological dimensions of primary school students, such as reducing shyness and improving their social skills. Learning social skills and also addressing shyness helps prepare primary school students for the challenges of adulthood, making them independent and capable.

5. Limitations & Suggestions

It is evident and necessary that education, especially at the primary level, should take appropriate measures to enhance students' social skills and reduce behavioral and psychological issues like shyness. Based on the research

findings, employing art therapy methods (such as art therapy) correctly and adequately can help primary school students by reducing maladaptive behaviors and strengthening self-confidence, as well as decreasing incompatible behaviors and enhancing social interaction, thereby improving their academic performance and psychological and educational development. Additionally, psychologists and school counselors are advised to address common behavioral and psychological problems among students more effectively through directing art sessions via scientific discussions with art teachers.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethics Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors contributed equally.

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