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Presentation date: December, 2021

Date of acceptance: January, 2022

Publication date: March, 2022

THE EFFECT OF CREATIVE DRAMA

ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL SKILLS OF CHILDREN WITH AUTISM IN TURKEY: A MIXED-METHOD RESEARCH

EL EFECTO DEL DRAMA CREATIVO EN EL DESARROLLO DE HABILIDADES SOCIALES DE NIÑOS CON AUTISMO EN TURQUÍA: UNA INVESTIGACIÓN DE MÉTODO MIXTO

Belgin Sevgi İçyüz¹

E-mail: belginsevgi@gmail.com

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3876-6549>

Erkan Efilti²

E-mail: erkan.efilti@manas.edu.kg

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1158-5764>

Rifat İçyüz³

E-mail: rfaticyuz@gmail.com

ORCID: <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1279-3936>

¹ Necmettin Erbakan University, Turkey.

² Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Kyrgyzstan.

³ Anadolu University, Türkiye.

Suggested citation (APA, 7th edition):

İçyüz, B. S., Efilti, E., & İçyüz, R. (2022). The effect of creative drama on the development of social skills of children with autism in Turkey: a mixed-method research. *Revista Universidad y Sociedad*, 14(2), 554-563.

ABSTRACT

Healthy social relationships and social skills for establishing these relationships play a major role in the harmony and happiness of a person who lives in a network of relationships. Social skills are of great importance for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and all individuals with special needs. This research investigates the effectiveness of the creative drama method in the development of social skills of children with ASD. The mixed-method research was preferred in the study, and a sequential transformative design was used as a sub-design. The research participants consisted of 4 students with ASD aged 8-11 and 8 teachers. It was suggested in the findings that there was a positive significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of the scale used. When the checklist results were examined, it was indicated that the students increased their scores towards the last sessions. When the qualitative data were compared with the scale's pre-test and post-test results, it was found out that the results were parallel, and the quantitative data supported the qualitative data. As a result of the research, it was seen that the creative drama method was effective in the development of existing social skills and in acquiring new social skills of students with ASD.

Keywords: Special education, autism spectrum disorder, social skills, development of social skills.

RESUMEN

Las relaciones sociales saludables y las habilidades sociales para establecer estas relaciones juegan un papel importante en la armonía y felicidad de una persona que vive en una red de relaciones. Las habilidades sociales son de gran importancia para los niños con Trastorno del Espectro Autista (TEA) y todas las personas con necesidades especiales. Esta investigación investiga la efectividad del método de drama creativo en el desarrollo de habilidades sociales de niños con TEA. Se prefirió la investigación de método mixto en el estudio, y se utilizó un diseño transformativo secuencial como subdiseño. Los participantes de la investigación fueron 4 estudiantes con TEA de 8 a 11 años y 8 docentes. Se sugirió en los hallazgos que hubo una diferencia significativa positiva entre los resultados de la prueba previa y posterior a la prueba de la escala utilizada. Cuando se examinaron los resultados de la lista de verificación, se indicó que los estudiantes aumentaron sus puntajes hacia las últimas sesiones. Cuando los datos cualitativos se compararon con los resultados de la prueba previa y posterior a la prueba de la escala, se descubrió que los resultados eran paralelos y que los datos cuantitativos respaldaban los datos cualitativos. Como resultado de la investigación, se vio que el método del drama creativo fue efectivo en el desarrollo de las habilidades sociales existentes y en la adquisición de nuevas habilidades sociales de los estudiantes con TEA.

Palabras clave: Educación especial, desorden del espectro autista, habilidades sociales, desarrollo de habilidades sociales.

INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is defined as a neurodevelopmental disorder that occurs in social areas and manifests itself with deficiencies in communication and interaction, limited, repetitive behaviors, interests, or activities. The medical diagnoses of autism in Turkey are carried out by child psychiatrists and neurologists. In general, the criteria specified in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) published by the American Psychiatric Association, observations made in the clinical environment, and family interviews are used. Children with a medical diagnosis of ASD should undergo educational evaluation, diagnosis, and placement processes by experts in Guidance and Research Centers (abbreviated **RAM** in Turkish) to benefit from the services provided by the state (MEB, 2018). In recent years, the spread of awareness activities, the increasing of the number of experts knowledgeable about autism, and the development of diagnostics help assessment tools for children with autism in Turkey contributing to the diagnosis of children with autism at an early age and participation in education.

Due to their limited social relationships, individuals with OSB are noted to have difficulty learning social skills in everyday relationships (Hill, et al., 2014). Some individuals perform social skills spontaneously, while others may not perform them as such. Individuals who cannot perform social skills on their own may not have learned these skills for various reasons during their childhood years. These are expressed as the child being afraid to exhibit behavior or skill, doing it out of anxiety, not having enough opportunities to learn that skill, or having limited mental skills (Afshari, 2012).

Social skills teaching is more important to ensure the admission of individuals with OSB to society. The best way to develop social skills is to do social skills exercises (Türker, et al., 2020). Social skills training programs are organized to do these exercises based on various approaches, and various methods/techniques are used, one of which is the drama method (Guli, et al., 2013). In the socialization of children with ASD, their relationship with their friends is important, and they learn cooperation, sharing, respect for others, and similar behaviors in drama groups.

One of the issues to take into account at the time of marriage is the form of education that will be imparted to the future children of the couple (Moncayo Aguiar, 2021). Considering the results of the studies, it was observed that peer-mediated teaching, creative drama, music therapy, direct teaching, and cognitive process approach methods contributed positively to the field of social skills. It was suggested that quite a few studies are dealing with

the creative drama method, which is considered one of the social skills teaching methods, and the effectiveness of this method was examined (Leekam, 2016). Based on this background, this study aimed to measure the effectiveness of the creative drama method for individuals with ASD to gain some social skills and improve their existing skills. In light of this information, the study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the creative drama method in the development of social skills of children with autism spectrum disorder. Accordingly, this study seeks answers to the following research questions:

- i) What are the results of the teachers' opinions before the drama activities regarding the sub-dimensions of the Social Skills Evaluation Scale (SSES) of children with ASD?
- ii) What is the effect of drama activities on the development of social skills of children and the social skills of children with ASD?
- iii) Is there a significant difference between the pre and post opinions of the teachers after the drama activities of the children with ASD regarding the sub-dimensions in SSES?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted as mixed-method research. The sequential transformative design is the mixed-method sub-design suitable for the nature of the research. The basic criteria of mixed-method research classification are time (sequential or simultaneous) and purpose (explanation, exploration, etc.) (Creswell, 2014). The general assumption of mixed-method research is that quantitative and qualitative research methods are used in a blended way. Thus, it allows for answering the research questions better than using only one method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In accordance with the sub-design, quantitative data were obtained first using the scale, then the qualitative data based on the drama sessions, and then the quantitative data were accessed, and the data collection process was completed in this study.

In the study, 4 students with ASD aged 8-11, 8 classroom teachers involved in the drama activities were included, and the researcher himself took part as a participant because he was the coordinator of the drama sessions. The classroom teachers of children with ASD constitute another group of the study. 8 teachers graduated from special education and have been teaching children with ASD for at least 5 years and involved in drama activities were included in the study. Before the drama sessions, pre-test and post-test were applied to determine the current situation of the student and to compare the development of the student at the end of the method. In this sense,

the data related to the first question of the research was obtained by ensuring that each student filled the scale by the classroom teacher.

The quantitative data were collected through the Social Skills Assessment Scale (SSES), and qualitative data were obtained by video camera recording using the drama method in the research process (Table 1).

Table 1. Data collection tools/techniques.

The research questions	Phase	Data collection tools/techniques
What are the results of the teachers' opinions before the drama activities regarding the sub-dimensions of the Social Skills Evaluation Scale (SSES) of children with ASD?	I. Quantitative	Participant information form SSES
What is the effect of drama activities on the development of social skills of children and the social skills of children with ASD?	II. Qualitative	Video camera recordings *SBC Researcher diary
Is there a significant difference between the pre and post opinions of the teachers after the drama activities of the children with ASD regarding the sub-dimensions in SSES?	III. Quantitative	SSES

Social Skills Assessment Scale (SSES)

Measuring communication skills by increasing social interactions was aimed through the scale developed by Akcamete and Avcioglu (2005). It is a 5-point Likert type and consists of 12 sub-scales and 69 items related to the social skills of children aged 7-12. The items in the scale are scored from 5 to 1 as "always," "often," "sometimes," "seldom," and "never." The lowest possible score is 69, and the highest score is 345.

Student Behavior Checklist (SBC)

The SBC was created within the scope of the research to observe the behaviors and possible developments of the students based on the literature and the opinions of the

experts. It was evaluated and approved by 3 different field experts for validity and suitability studies.

Research Process

Teachers were requested to fill the SSES to reveal the existing conditions of the current research design in the first place. Since the teachers were thought to be the individuals who knew the students best in the school environment before the drama practices were started, SCSS was given by the classroom teachers to reflect the current social skills of the students. Then, they were asked to evaluate them according to the criteria determined in terms of social skills in the scale. It was aimed to develop the social skills of the students who got low scores in the SSES pre-test results by using the creative drama method to do and maintain group work, start and maintain a relationship, and self-control skills. Considering the academic, language, and social skills of the participant group, 17-session drama sessions were designed and implemented. After the sessions, the Student Behavior Checklist was used, as it enabled the students to see the expected change and level, and qualitative data were obtained by evaluating videotapes by 3 experts. Quantitative data were obtained by having students' teachers complete the SSES post-test after the drama sessions. Thus, the data collection process was completed.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analyzed inductively. Since the quantitative data was not sufficient for the normal distribution analysis ($n < 30$), the pre-test post-test comparisons of the teachers' responses to the scale were analyzed by applying the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Sheard, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

First, the teachers were requested to fill in the SSES (8 pre-test-8 post-test), then creative drama sessions (17 sessions) were designed and implemented. After the sessions, the data collection process was completed by applying the SBC to track the students in terms of observing the expected change and level. In this respect, qualitative and quantitative findings obtained from the data collected during the research process were presented in separate tables so that they can be seen as a whole and are blended together due to the nature of the research design.

SSES Findings

The mean score of the analysis result of the pre-test for the evaluation of social skills before the drama method was found as 1.42 and its standard deviation (SD) as .17.

Regarding these pre-test results, it is seen that the social skills of the students are between “seldom” and “never.” It is necessary to compare the post-test results with the pre-test results to suggest whether the drama practices are effective or not. According to this, the following table 2 is found:

Table 2. SSES pretest-posttest Wilcoxon test analysis results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
SSES	Negative ranks	1	1.50	1.50	-2.31	.021
	Positive ranks	7	4.93	34.50		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

According to the significance level $p < .05$, there is a positive significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results. Based on the mean and sum of rank difference scores, it is seen that the observed difference is in favor of the positive ranks, i.e., the posttest. These results also indicate that creative drama activities carried out during 17 weeks have an important effect on the development of children’s social skills. Along with these general results, findings related to each sub-skill in the scale are given separately (Table 3).

Table 3. SSES basic social skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Basic So- cial Skills	Negative ranks	0	.00	.00	-2.37	.018
	Positive ranks	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

According to the Wilcoxon signed-rank test analysis, the significance level of basic social skills is a significant difference when $p < .05$ is considered, and it can be said that the applied drama sessions have an effect on basic social skills (Table 4).

Table 4. SSES basic speaking skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
B a s i c Speaking Skills	Negative ranks	2	1.75	3.50	-2.03	.042
	Positive ranks	6	5.42	32.50		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

The significance level of the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test related to basic speaking skills, which is one of the sub-skills of SSES, was found to be .042 according to $p < .05$. Accordingly, there is a significant difference of the drama sessions on the basic speaking skills (Table 5).

Table 5. SSES advanced speaking skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Advanced Speaking Skills	Negative ranks	2	1.75	3.50	-1.47	.141
	Positive ranks	4	4.38	17.50		
	Ties	4				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

According to this finding, drama sessions did not make a significant difference in advanced speaking skills ($p > .05$). It can be suggested that the reason for this may be the low number of sessions or the special cases of the students (Table 6).

Table 6. SSES relationship initiation skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Relationship Initiation Skills	Negative ranks	1	3.00	3.00	-2.10	.035
	Positive ranks	7	4.71	33.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

The result of the analysis of the relationship initiation skills was .035 according to $p < .05$, and according to this result, it can be indicated that drama sessions have a significant difference in initiating the relationship, which is the sub-dimension of SSES (Table 7).

Table 7. SSES maintaining relationship skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Maintaining Relationship Skills	Negative ranks	0	.00	.00	-2.36	.018
	Positive ranks	7	4.00	28.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

According to the analysis of the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test, it can be said that there is a significant difference in the maintaining relationship skills with .018 when the significance level is taken as $p < .05$. Accordingly, it can be stated that the drama sessions applied were effective (Table 8).

Table 8. SSES group work skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Group Work Skills	Negative ranks	2	2.50	5.00	-1.82	.069
	Positive ranks	6	5.17	31.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

It was seen that the significance level was .069 according to p .05, and drama sessions did not make a significant difference on group work skills (Table 9).

Table 9. SSES emotional skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Emotional Skills	Negative ranks	2	1.50	3.00	-2.10	.035
	Positive ranks	6	5.50	33.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

Drama sessions made a positive and significant difference in increasing students' emotional skills (p<.035) (Table 10).

Table 10. SSES self-control skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Self-Control Skills	Negative ranks	1	1.00	1.00	-2.20	.028
	Positive ranks	6	4.50	27.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

There is a significant difference in students' self-control skills according to their pre-test and post-test results. It can be suggested that the sessions were effective (Table 11).

Table 11. SSES coping with aggressive behavior skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Coping with Aggressive Behavior Skills	Negative ranks	2	1.50	3.00	-1.86	.063
	Positive ranks	5	5.00	25.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

As a result of the analysis regarding the coping with aggressive behavior skills, a value of .063 was obtained based on $p < .05$. It was observed that drama activities did not make a statistically significant difference in developing social skills (Table 12).

Table 12. SSES accepting results skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Accepting Results Skills	Negative ranks	1	1.50	1.50	-2.32	.020
	Positive ranks	7	4.93	34.50		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

According to the analysis, when the significance level was based on $p < .05$, it was seen that there was a significant difference in the accepting results skills results with .020 and the drama sessions were effective (Table 13).

Table 13. SSES instruction skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Instruction Skills	Negative ranks	2	1.50	3.00	-2.10	.035
	Positive ranks	6	5.50	33.00		
	Ties	0				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

It was observed that the Wilcoxon signed-ranks test result was .028 and the drama sessions were effective on students' instruction skills (Table 14).

Table 14. SSES cognitive skills Wilcoxon signed-rank test results.

	Pretest-Posttest	n	Mean rank	Sum of ranks	Z	p
Cognitive Skills	Negative ranks	0	.00	.00	-2.38	.017
	Positive ranks	7	5.50	33.00		
	Ties	1				
	Total	8				
a. posttest < pretest b. posttest > pretest c. posttest = pretest						

The significance level was found as .017 based on $p < .05$. It was observed that the drama sessions made a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test on cognitive skills.

Considering the significance level of each of the SSES sub-skills analysis results as $p < .05$, there is no significant difference in the 3 sub-skills. These are advanced speaking skills with .141, group work skills with .069, and finally, coping with aggressive behavior skills with .063. It is seen that there is a significant difference in other sub-skills. Accordingly, this finding shows that creative drama sessions are effective in improving the social skills of the participants except for the 3 sub-skills specified.

Student Behavior Checklist Findings

The checklist was prepared based on the literature and expert opinion to observe the development and/or change in each student due to the drama sessions and to express whether the sessions are effective. The data were obtained by examining the drama sessions of 5 sessions and 3 field experts selected by random assignment method for each student. It was acquired based on the average of the scores obtained from the field experts for each student and session (Table 15).

Table 15. Student behavior checklist results.

Sessions	Ahmet	Veli	Ayşe	Hasan
2	38	37	32	29
5	29	34	36	26
7	39	37	42	32
13	36	39	42	33
16	42	41	43	36

Note: Student code names are used. The highest score that can be obtained is 45.

Considering the results of the SBC in general, it was seen that the students increased their scores towards the last sessions. In the 16th session, which was one of the last sessions of the drama applications with 17 sessions, Ayşe got the highest score and Hasan the lowest. There is a positive significant difference in SSES pre-test and post-test results in favor of post-test. This indicates the results are parallel when the results of the SBC are compared with this result.

Consequently, based on the sub-skills of the scale for the pre-test and post-test results regarding the findings, it is important to note that there is no significant difference in the results of advanced speaking skills, group work skills, and coping with aggressive behaviors skills. To this end, when the qualitative data were examined, it was seen that the students had problems in group activities related to the specified skills, and it was in the same direction with the data in both the researcher's diary and the checklist. In the drama sessions, it was observed that the scores of the participants increased towards the last sessions. Hence, it was observed that the quantitative data support the qualitative data and the qualitative data, as expected from the research design, and they were in a similar direction in terms of findings.

In the present study, the effectiveness of creative drama in developing social skills of children with ASD was examined. Teachers who are role models in children's social development were asked to evaluate children. It can be

stated that the fact that the practitioner/drama leader who will carry out activities to improve social skills is classroom teachers provides a positive effect and evaluation (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004). Additionally, the development of social and emotional skills in children and the permanence of these acquired characteristics in their future life may depend on the individual himself or on a learning process supported by activities. In this sense, especially considering the children with ASD, it is much more important to support them with the correct educational approach/techniques during their education life (Boyd, et al., 2005). In this context, it is thought that training designed with the help of active learning programs or models prepared based on different outcomes can improve children's social skills.

It is also emphasized that the children will adapt to the society in which he is involved with the help of their family, peers, and teacher, as well as a change in all the lower dimensions of development as a whole. Internal factors such as hereditary characteristics and socio-economic status surrounding the individual are reported to be affected by parent education programs and the training of the practitioner (Webster-Stratton & Reid, 2004), and the practitioner's opinions and practices towards social development (Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013). Another and the most important factor, the family, should not be ignored in this regard. In addition to the families' demographics, it is important to learn about their education level, how much they care about their children, and how much of the basic values accepted by society can pass on to their children. The reason is that children can obtain the values specified in their critical periods from their parents. In order to achieve this, parents should be able to go through other developmental periods, especially social skills, and have sufficient background. For this purpose, parents' psychological resilience should be increased by providing social support and all kinds of support.

Specifically, it was observed that there was a change in most of the sub-skills specified in SSES, and the direction of this change was at the positive point of development. After the regular participation of children in education life, teachers can improve the skills of the child by making important touches in limited times at school. One of these is social skills (O'Neill, 2008). It may be the product of an incomplete perspective to think that he or she may have acquired all social skills within the period set in the study. On the contrary, it would not be wrong to claim that they developed their existing social skills and acquired new skills.

It was observed that the purpose of the session and the material used in the acquisition of skills in all sub-dimensions

in the scale did not attract their attention, they may be sick or not willing to participate in the sessions, and some deficiencies or development could not be achieved in the limited time due to the effect of some external variables. When these skills are carefully considered, it is important to note that the children in the study group have typical characteristics and that studies and training should be continued for the development of these skills throughout their education life, not in limited time as in the current study. From this perspective, it can be asserted that there can be different variables to carry out the activity in a healthy and desired way. It is also stated in the literature that all these variables must be compatible when the activity is performed (Köseoğlu & Ünlü, 2006).

In this study, the findings that children who receive an education with drama sessions for social skill development, which are prepared based on teacher evaluation, have the priority of developing basic social skills, group work, initiating and maintaining relationships have similarities with the studies in the literature (Dereli İman, 2014; Pekdoğan, 2016). The importance of developing coping with aggressive behavior skills is clearly revealed in this study. The issue of anger in children is a subject that attracts much attention. It is also stated that there are various education/teaching methods/techniques such as diverting attention so that children can cope with and control anger (Wilde, 2006). In this research, it was given embedded in drama sessions to reduce aggressive behaviors. As a result of the analyses, it can be wrong to claim no development or change in aggressive behavior. Still, a positive change can be achieved with different assessment and evaluation tools in the future.

In general, the present research findings are consistent with the findings of the studies (O'Neill, 2008, O'Brennan, 2009) in the literature field where the social skills assessment scale and creative drama method were effective in developing social skills. Moreover, it is stated that teacher competence plays an essential role in acquiring social skills in children and in the development of existing ones based on the literature (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). The teacher who conducts the research and prepares and applies the drama sessions has the professional experience, competence to perform drama applications, and a field expert.

CONCLUSIONS

Since drama provides an improvised communication and interaction environment in one aspect, it allows children to exhibit their performances in all directions in the classroom. Analyzing and interpreting students' lifestyle with ASD in the classroom environment leads them to produce

ideas by overcoming timid attitudes. In this sense, 17 drama sessions were prepared and applied for the development of social skills, including basic skills based on the drama method according to the sub-dimensions of SSEC. Besides, the drama method's effectiveness was investigated by ensuring that students fill the SSEC before and after the application. Consequently, it can be suggested that drama is effective in gaining social skills and improving the children's existing skills.

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