

Imaginative Play: A Teaching Strategy for the Socio-Emotional Development among Preschool with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Abstract

The study investigated the effect of imaginative play on socio-emotional development of children with ASD. The study employed an experimental pre-test-post-test control group design. which involved two groups, 10 children with ASD. The sample was selected using non-probability sampling, focusing on purposive sampling method. The researcher conducted observation regarding socio-emotional skills of the participants inside the classroom, reviewed records, teacher's journal and assessed the children using Phil. ECCD Checklist for socio-emotional domain. The result established that the participants in the experimental group manifested slight delay in their overall development while the control group manifested suggesting delay in their overall development. It revealed that the participants in the experimental group had higher socio-emotional levels than the control group. Based on the observations, the tea party, play kitchen, and superhero contributed to the socio-emotional development. The researcher recommended this study should be disseminated to teachers and administrators of the school to continue the employment of imaginative play for socio-emotional skills development, imaginative play be tried out to other learners with disabilities specifically those with delays in socio-emotional aspect. Longer period should be given to the experiment, teachers should be aware of the different learning needs and interest of their learners to help the choice of imaginative play to facilitate learning, the schools should provide more varieties of play materials to children with ASD to improve their socio-emotional skills, and the future researchers should use the results to enrich and find ways to help children with ASD improve their socio-emotional skills.

Keywords: imaginative play, autism spectrum disorder, socio-emotional development, Children with ASD

1. Introduction

Play is at the heart of education. It is a natural way for children to learn about their world and interact with those around them. Play is also being valued by children because it brings sense of the world, they get to enjoy it and feel that they belong. Being included in play is about being included in the social world of childhood.

Imagining is a way of learning as well as a way of playing, and it requires a great deal of

thinking. Imagining shows that children are developing from sensorimotor thinking of preschoolers to more mature symbolic thinking. It evolves gradually from imitation and the exploration of toddlers, two-year old and preschoolers.

Imagination is the ability to draw picture, a sad story, or an idea in the mind. It is the ability to feel and believe of something that is not real. When children use their imagination, they could be anything they want, and they could travel through time and space. Play has an important effect on children's imaginative development, it is a common activity among children, but it is not just a free time that the child enjoys. Imaginative play is one of the ways that young children come to understand the world around them. As these young children become increasingly aware of the world around them, they begin to imitate what they see. They actively explore objects to find out what they can do. As they interact with significant people in their lives, they build the understandings they will need to engage in imaginative play.

Relative to this, the researchers have been handling preschool children with ASD for a longer period and capturing their attention was the first step to be established for these learners to participate and cooperate with the lesson. Therefore, imaginative play was chosen among the vast selection of other types of play because the researchers noticed that children lack imitation skills, are hesitant to join other children while at play, are struggling to converse with one another and had difficulty in understanding other's emotions. Preschool years are critical years of development for both children with and without disabilities. Therefore, the goal of this study was to find out the effectiveness of imaginative play as a teaching strategy on the socio-emotional development of preschool children with ASD. The researchers aimed to pursue this study to have a deeper understanding on the socio-emotional level projected by the preschool 5 children with ASD and to find means on how to improve their learning. This will greatly benefit the learners, as well as other children with ASD.

Children with ASD are recognized with its three categorizing triads namely impairment in social communication and social interaction and having repetitive behaviors (DSM-5). This group of children is often characterized of having their own world, prefers playing alone at times ignores and avoids what the stimulus in the environment is. Their social emotional domain is characterized with fleeting to absent eye contact, refuses to be touched by anyone of any kind, and does not respond on simple to complex conversations. These are some of the hallmarks/symptoms of autism and should be signals for early intervention.

Therefore, universally as young as the child with Autism, the more important is early intervention as there is a greater likelihood that these children can benefit from the intervention. Presently, most of the teachers who have sufficient knowledge and awareness about the characteristics of these special learners would join up to other learners in the regular education to be able to learn how to adapt to any change in the environment. They also seek out social relationships with peers and classmates. They need to experience to make friends and have a positive social life.

One-way teachers can help children with ASD develop these skills is to understand the progression of how young children learn to play. In the earliest stages of play, teachers working

with children with ASD need to know the appropriate interactions. As Weiss and Harris (2001) described, children first establish the foundations of subsequent social interactions by learning basic imaginative play. In this way, children with ASD like the learners of this researcher, can gain more success in toy activities and then enjoy successful interaction with peer.

The research intended to determine the effects of imaginative play as a teaching strategy for the socio-emotional development of preschool children with ASD at Tuguegarao West Central School Tuguegarao, Cagayan, Philippines. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions: (1.) What is the profile of the participants regarding a. Age, Gender and Socio-economic background of parents, b. Nature of work, c. Time of parents. (2.) What is the socio-emotional level of children with ASD before and after the imaginative play as teaching strategy? (3.) Are there differences in socio-emotional level of children with ASD before and after imaginative play? (4.) What imaginative play contributed to the socio-emotional development of children with ASD?

2. Literature Review

Wellman (2018) define theory of mind (ToM) as the ability to understand the mental states of others and to recognize that those mental states may differ from their own. According to Kombi (2014), Tom is a child's ability to understand human behavior. It also refers to a person's ability to see the reason and make conclusion about the others mental states. It reflects the capacity to interpret what others are saying, to feel their behavior and to predict what people will do. Human beings are said to have this intuition that they can easily decode the feelings of another person. It is not guessing what Is Inside the mind of everyone's head but rather through observing his body language/gestures, facial expressions, tone of voice and eye contact they can decode the feelings of others. Children with ASD are delayed in the development of ToM. They are often aloof with other children because of their ability in decoding non-verbal cues. Most of the time, they find another people's behavior confusing and unpredictable.

Lev Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development strongly believed on the ideas that social interaction and imaginative play are large contributors to the process of cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, children's social interaction with more skilled adults and peers is indispensable to their cognitive development. Imaginative play helps the children give meaning and make sense of the world they live in. This can also help them to develop their thinking skills as well as the use of language. He believed that children could experience important learning skills if the adult companion is skilled enough. The child will emulate what they observe and the instructions they receive by copying and internalization. Through this interaction, they learn to use the tools that will help them adapt and be successful in their culture. Imaginative play shapes the children to visualize the world, to rationalize situations, and acquiring language. He believed that children often converse with themselves when they engage in imaginative play, they imitate others, and they navigate the world around them. Through play, it allows fewer verbal children to talk more than in other settings.

Santrock (2007) states that Vygotsky portrayed the child's development as inseparable from

social and cognitive activities. He believed that play provided foundations for children's developing skills that are essential to social, personal and professional activities. He recognized that play was one of the most important sources of learning for young children, and that learning occurs primarily through observations and interactions with adults. He also believes that play relieves a feeling of stress and boredom, gives connection to different kinds of people in a positive way, enhances creative thinking and exploration among children with different ages, and lastly it boosts their self-confidence.

Smilansky theory of play consists of functional play, where children use their muscles and senses to explore things around; conditional play, where children use their muscles and senses at the same time are trying to be creative; games with rules, where children are trying to understand the use of rules in play; dramatic play, complex form of play involving the imitative and imaginative capacities of the children. She mentioned that children who showed the greatest capacities for social make-believe play also displayed more imagination and less aggression, and a greater ability to use language for speaking and understanding other children.

Brock (2014) mentioned that the best way to ensure that a child will become socially and emotionally well adjusted is by allowing her to engage in play. Socially and emotionally adjusted children are able to adapt to any change in the schedule any unpredictable moment.

Basically, children with ASD needed to understand how others feel and think to be able to form social relationships with peers and classmates. In this way, they develop true friendships, one of the most significant ways to gauge whether the children are socially successful. A preschool imaginative play allows children to imitate desired actions which are very helpful in connecting to their surroundings. Primarily, imaginative play is loaded with all kinds of literacy opportunities including vocabulary, conversation and math that are all based on activities needed to the development of their socio-emotional skills.

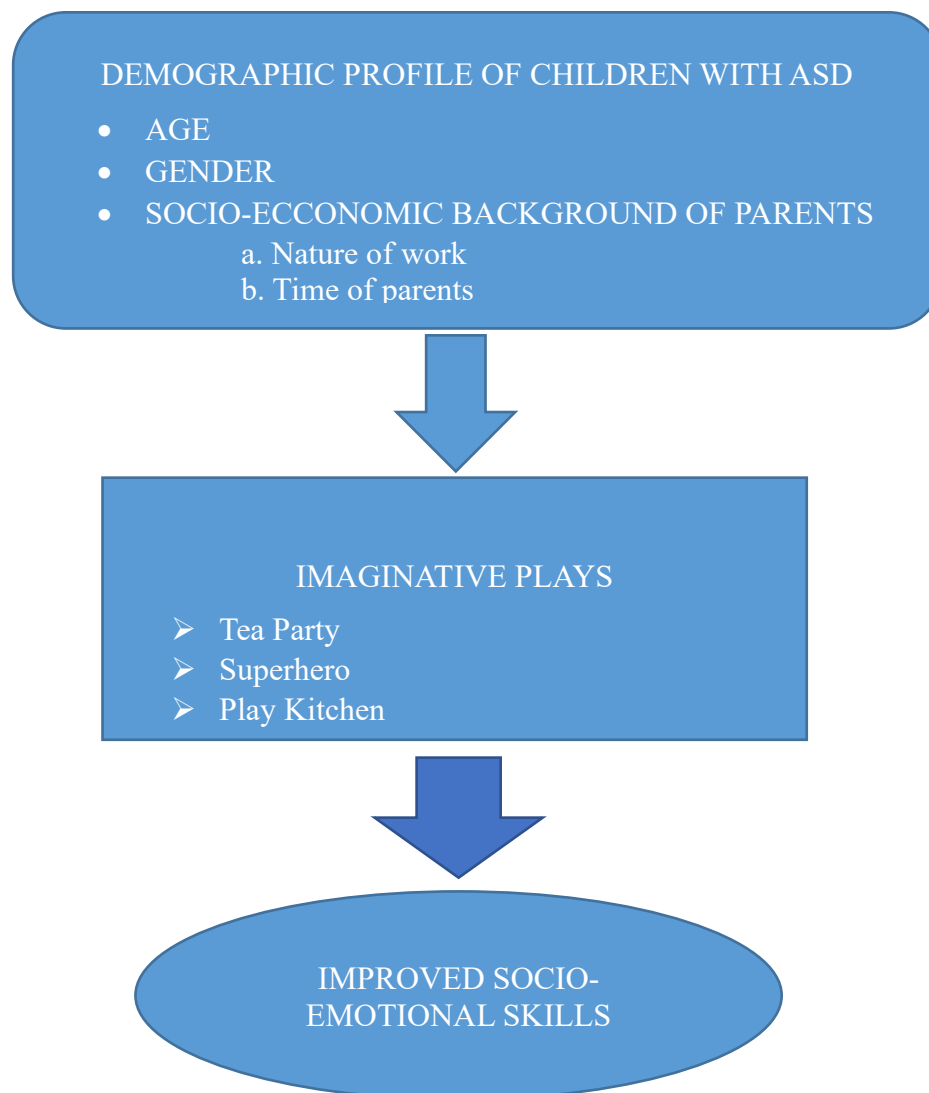


Figure 1. Role of Imaginative Play in the Socio-emotional development of Learners with ASD

Figure 1 shows the conceptual paradigm which involves the respondent's profile in the first box in terms of age, gender, socio-economic background of parents and socio-emotional level of children with autism. That age and gender contributes largely on the kind of play that children with ASD will want to execute which has an impact on their socio-emotional development thus these variables were considered in the choice of imaginative play employed in this study. As stated above, socio-economic background of parents which includes time and nature of work are adversely affecting the development of socio-emotional skills of children with ASD. Several types of imaginative play were employed as a teaching strategy as shown in the second box.

Changes in the socio-emotional skills are expected after the employment of imaginative play as shown in the third box.

3. Research Method

The study confined itself to promoting imaginative play as a teaching strategy during introduction of a new lesson and during socialization time of the children. Specifically, the use of props, costumes and toys in relation with the activity and lesson to be given in the class was employed.

The criterion of Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) Checklist for Social Emotional Domain section was used to assess the baseline and the succeeding social emotional domain of the children after 6 weeks of implementation of imaginative play as a teaching strategy.

This study utilized Experimental Pre-test-Post-test Control Group Design. This design involved two groups which were formed through random assignment of the participants. One group, which was the experimental group, received a treatment of imaginative play. The other one, which was the control group, did not receive any treatment. At the end of the study, both groups were given post-test the same tool taken during the pre-test.

The participants in this study consisted of 10 children either male or female whose age range from 3 to 5 years old; they were all diagnosed with ASD by a developmental pediatrician. Each group was composed of 5 members.

To provide the necessary data to determine the development of social emotional skills among preschool children with ASD, varied instruments were utilized for this research. (Basic Information Sheet, Observation Schedule, Records – Teacher's journal (daily and monthly) and Social Emotional Skills Criterion of the Philippine Early Childhood Development (Phil. ECD).

After obtaining the data, imaginative play was employed as a teaching strategy for at least 5-15 minutes/session, three times a week (M-W-F) for 6 weeks. Imaginative plays were chosen based on age, gender, interest, and availability of play materials. Moreover, a post test using the same tool was conducted to the participants to measure the changes of their socio-emotional skills. The following imaginative play activities were utilized tea party (plastic small cups, plastic kettle, plastic donut, plastic pie), play kitchen (plastic egg, plastic stove, plastic fork and spoon, plastic knife, plastic fruits and vegetables), superheroes (wand, white cloth, mask).

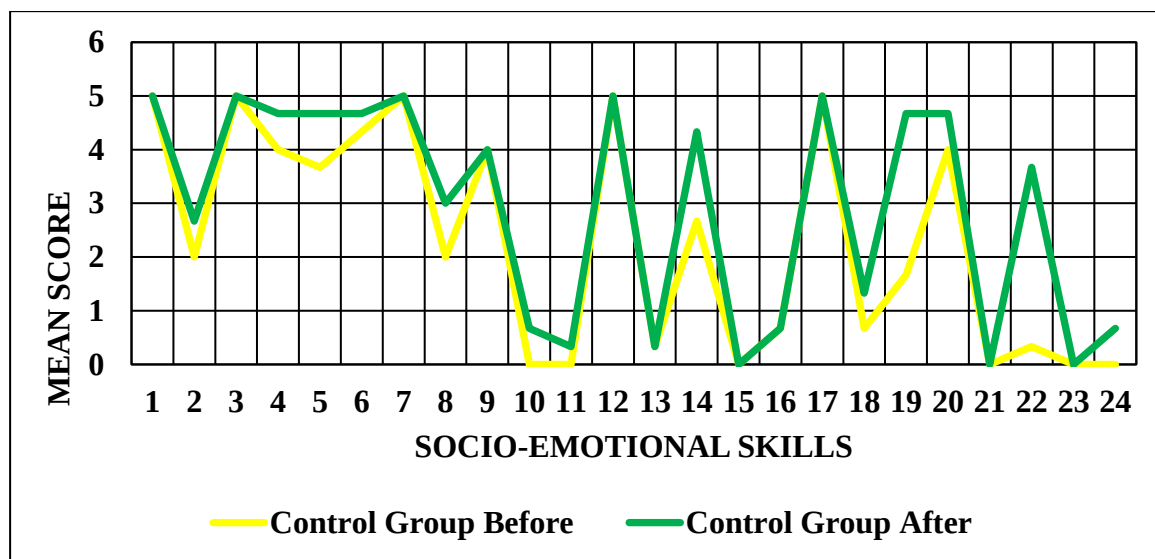
The study made use of descriptive statistics. Frequency count and percentage distribution were used to describe the demographic profile of the participants. Ranking was used to determine the order of imaginative play activities employed. Furthermore, arbitrary scale for the interpretation.

4. Finding and Discussion

The study showed that out of the 10 respondents, 8 or 80% are within the age range of 4.6 to 5 years old. Furthermore, the rest of the participants have an equal age distribution of 1 or 10 % within the age bracket of 4.1 to 4.5 years old and 3.6 to 4 years old. Male participants (8 or

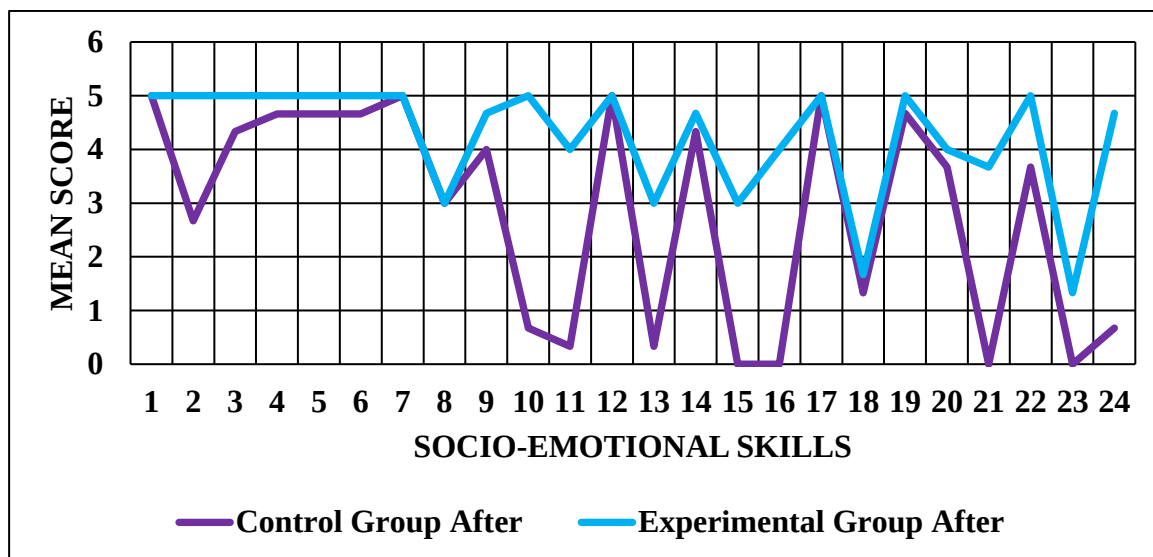
80%) outnumbered the female participants (2 or 20 %). This shows that there was a gender imbalance in the gender distribution of respondents. According to morbidity and mortality weekly report (MMWR) of CDC states that males were four times more likely to be identified with ASD.

Figure 2. Level of differences in socio-emotional skills of control group before and after the employment of the traditional teaching approach



From the graph, there is a little bit of increased in the response in the development of socio-emotional skills after the employment of the traditional teaching approach, but it is not high. The mean scores of the control group before and after the traditional teaching approach is comparable.

Figure 3. Mean score of socio-emotional skills of experimental and control group after the intervention



From the graph, it can be observed that the mean score of experimental groups is higher than the control group after the employment of imaginative play. The experimental group almost gained the highest mean score of 5. Hence, imaginative play is an effective teaching strategy in improving the socio-emotional skills of children with ASD since the mean score of the experimental group is higher than the control group.

Figure 4. Comparison of Socio-Emotional Level of Experimental and Control Group Before and After the Treatment

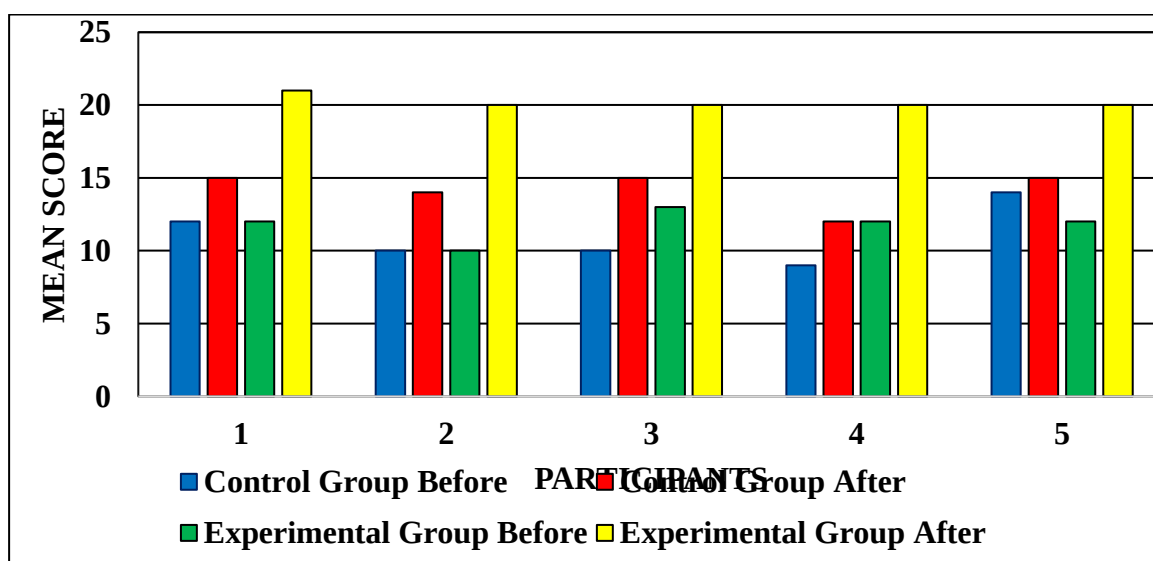


Figure 4 shows the comparison of the socio-emotional level of individual participants in both

the experimental and control group. The figure further shows that participant 1 and 2 in both control and experimental were approximately equal in their socio-emotional level before the experiment. Participants 3 and 4 in the experimental group have higher socio-emotional levels than their counterpart in the control group. Participant 5 in the control group had higher socio-emotional level than his counterpart in the experimental group.

After six weeks of the employment of imaginative play, it is observed that the participants in the experimental group had higher levels of socio-emotional development than their counterpart in the control group.

It is remarkable that participants' topmost imaginative play which contributed evidently to the socio-emotional skills development was the tea party followed by the play kitchen and lastly was the superhero.

5. Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, the researchers made the following conclusions: 1. The male participants with ASD outnumber the female participants. 2. The participants' ages are within the age group for the preschoolers over 3-5. 3. The parents of children with ASD belong to the low-income group. Majority of the parents spend about 2 hours of their time with their children. There should be time allotted for play which significantly influences socio-emotional development of children in pre-school. The more the children engaged in play the better for their socio-emotional development. 4. The employment of imaginative play influence the level of socio-emotional skills of children with ASD given enough support or guidance from the teacher. The existence of teachers during children's play was very crucial as it influenced the children socio-emotional development by providing assistance as well as security. 5. Children who engage in different types of imaginative play facilitates their socio-emotional development. This is because every play has a certain part it plays in the socio-emotional development of a child and therefore providing a variety of plays help in enhancing their socio-emotional skills.

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International Conference of Organizational Innovation 2024

Proceedings

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2024

e-ISSN: 3064-6030
FMI, Vol 1
23-25 July 2024

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